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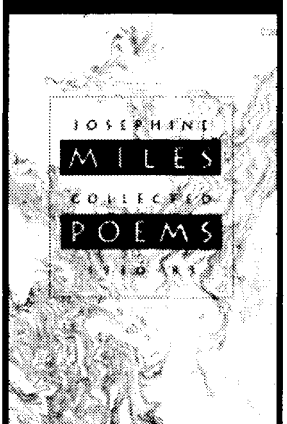

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VOLUME LII NUMBER 1 SPRING 1999

ESSAY
The Medical Keats — JOSEPH EPSTEIN — 44

MEMOIRS
Ted Hughes (1930–1998): A Personal Retrospect — BRIAN COX — 29
Hiking In, and Hiking Out — JOHN HALES — 77

FICTION
Rusya
Translated from the Russian by Graham Hettlinger — IVAN BUNIN — 19

POETRY
A Delay in Vorkuta; The Formal Gardens at Karia; Home Before Light — D. NURKSE — 65
Not Falling — LYNNE McMAHON — 68
Red Shoes; Christmas Eve at the Cemetery — LUCILLE LANG DAY — 69
Tacit — DEAN ALBARELLI — 71
White Spaces — JEFFREY HARRISON — 73
Dust — JAYANTA MAHAPATRA — 76
Almanac — PATTIANN ROGERS — 95
Deer Season: U.S. 41; Mrs. Sewell's Poems — STEPHEN C. BEHRENDT — 97
Rue du Faubourg Poissonnière; Night Train, Sweden — NINA BOGIN — 99
Voices; Three Fish — F.D. REEVE — 101
During the Rosary; The Crystal — DAVID DOOLEY — 103
Missing Person — PATRICK WALSH — 106

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CHRONICLES

Film — BERT CARDULLO — 107
"The Sweet Hereafter"

Theatre — RICHARD HORNBY — 115
"More Stately Mansions"; "Phèdre"; "Damaged Care"

Art — JOHN LOUGHERY — 122
Mark Rothko at the Whitney; Jackson Pollock at MoMA

Music — ROBERT S. CLARK — 129
"The Philosopher's Stone" and Mozart; "The Marriage of Figaro" at the Metropolitan Opera

REVIEWS

Authorizing Samuel Johnson — WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD — 133
"Samuel Johnson: The Life of an Author," by Lawrence Lipking

Varieties of Poetic Experience — DAVID MASON — 141
W.S. Merwin, Timothy Murphy, Karl Shapiro, etc.

Sorcerers' Apprentices — BROOKE ALLEN — 150
Paul Theroux's falling out with V.S. Naipaul; Rosemary Mahoney's "One Summer with Lillian Hellman"

Reading at Risk to Ourselves: The Novels of Matthew Stadler — BRUCE BAWER — 157
"Allan Stein" and other novels by a daring young writer

Victorian Voyages and Other Mind Trips — SUSAN BALÉE — 167
Andrea Barrett, José Saramago, Lorrie Moore, etc.

COMMENT

The Three Countries of the American Mind — MICHAEL LIND — 6

LETTER TO THE EDITOR — 5

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS — 176

TO OUR READERS

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Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor:

I am completely grateful for Robert McDowell's generous review of a book of my poems in your Winter 1999 issue, and so I don't very happily take the risk of *appearing* to be ungrateful. I feel nevertheless obliged to protest Mr. McDowell's evident wish to include me in the "serious literary movement" known as "Expansive poetry."

Embarrassing as it is to plead ignorance in self-defense, it is a fact that I never heard of Expansive poetry until I read Mr. McDowell's review. Moreover, for what seem to me good and sound reasons, I have not ever taken part in any literary movement of any sort.

I hereby resign from any and all movements that I have never joined.

Port Royal, Kentucky — Wendell Berry

Robert McDowell replies:

Early in my chronicle, I said that the poets under discussion felt the influence of Expansive poetry, and have enjoyed the benefits of a more tolerant climate for form and narrative brought about by its poets. With all good-natured respect, Mr. Berry's "resignation" does not change my view. I never said that he joined any movement. I never said that I joined any movement! But the ocean still exists, and in part, shapes our world, whether or not we choose to swim in it. I am happy to bring the sound of the surf to Mr. Berry's door, and to assure him that he need not rush to deny the arrival of unexpected friends.

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Comment:

The Three Countries of the American Mind

THE OBSESSION OF THE NEWS MEDIA with the Monica Lewinsky affair, in addition to other recent scandals—the forgeries by Stephen Glass of *The New Republic*, the CNN nerve gas hoax—have focused attention on the shortcomings of the mass media. While criticism is in order, it should be remembered that there are domains of public discourse other than journalism that also suffer from chronic institutional pathologies. American intellectual life at the end of the twentieth century is divided, like Caesar's Gaul, into three parts: the academy, the media, and the realm of the partisan think tank.

The land of academe resembles a sclerotic European welfare state, in which excessive regulation protects lazy bureaucrats and pampered union members, while freezing out an ever-growing pool of the resentful unemployed. The proliferation of scholarly disciplines since the nineteenth century has usually been the result, not of the advancement of knowledge, but of attempts by professors to protect themselves from economic competition. High barriers to entry (like making tenure depend on the Ph.D. and refereed publication) keep wages up by keeping the labor pool limited. At the same time, rigid specialization by the tenured members of the academic guild prevents a versatile genius from dominating a number of subjects in the humanities or natural sciences. An American equivalent of Max Weber might be allowed to write about the history of religion or constitutional politics or ethical philosophy—but if he tried to write about all three, he would find himself *persona non grata* in the academic world, and quite possibly unemployable.

Just as European welfare states protect the employed and unionized at the expense of huge numbers of unorganized job-seekers, so the American academic guild system has generated a surplus of graduate students and professors who cannot find employment commensurate with their skills (or at least commensurate with their credentials). The result is a growing proletariat of lecturers, adjunct professors and grad-student teaching assistants who do most of the work on campus. Freed from onerous labor, the tenured few concentrate on making their disciplines even less accessible to the untenured hordes—and even less intelligible to potential rivals in other departments.

It should be a cause of concern, therefore, that the majority of today's prestige novelists and poets make their livings as academics. A minority

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are tenured in literature departments at prestigious universities; a much greater number are goliards, rambling from this campus writing program to that. The dependence of our literati on the academy is disguised by an interesting convention that implicitly delegitimates all writers outside of universities. A business executive or a journalist who publishes poetry or fiction is usually identified as a business executive or journalist, albeit one with literary interests. However, a professor of literature who writes fiction or poetry is not a professor, but a "novelist" or a "poet."

One need not be an economic determinist to predict that professor-poets and professor-novelists will write a different kind of poetry and fiction than the writers in the past who earned their keep as hard-scrabble journalists, provincial clergy or royal courtiers. The danger of specialization, the *déformation professionnelle* of the academic writer, was recently brought home to me in a conversation with the graduate of an Ivy League undergraduate writing program. She told me, to my horror, that students in their freshman year were required to choose between the Fiction track, the Nonfiction track, and the Poetry track. "What if you choose the Fiction track, but decide you want to write a sonnet in your junior year?" I asked. "That kind of thing is discouraged," she replied. "It's hard to get into a good graduate writing program if it looks like you're all over the map."

If the American academy is a bureaucratic Nordic or Central European welfare state, the American media realm resembles a Central American or Caribbean banana republic. Almost everything is owned by a few families of obscenely rich absentee landlords (the publishers) who rely on subservient and ruthless overseers (the editors) to discipline the unorganized workers in the sweatshops and plantations (the "content providers," formerly known as writers).

The intellectual plantation economy, long the norm in Hollywood, is becoming the norm in all areas of magazine and book publishing, thanks to the merger of the mass media. Already literary novelists are as obscure as screenwriters, compared to big-name agents and editors, who are becoming the equivalent of producer-directors. Before long high-rolling celebrity editors may start taking credit for books, with the name of the actual author in small print in the acknowledgements, the way the screenwriter's name is buried in the scrolling credits.

Everyone in journalism has his or her own horror story about the publishers. Often these revolve around the dreaded FOP (Friend of the Publisher), who has been promised space in the magazine or newspaper by the owner. Sometimes the FOP is a Guest Editor. Tina Brown turned over an issue of *The New Yorker* to Guest Editor Roseanne Barr.

In the Media Republic, as in all Third World countries, the angry mob turns on the front-line soldiers (the reporters), rather than on the powers whom they serve. The public is right to think that the mass media are obsessed with subjects like the O.J. Trial and l'affaire Lewinsky and the death of Princess Di—but wrong to blame the correspondents, who, after all, are only carrying out orders. The truth is that many journalists

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and pundits would rather examine important but neglected subjects. It is the editors and producers and publishers who play up the scandals, on the correct calculation that this strategy boosts readership or viewership. The editor of one of the nation's leading opinion pages told me that she had been pointedly reminded by her newspaper's business department that circulation spiked whenever an Op-Ed about Monicagate appeared—and went south at the mention of the Asian financial crisis. Another newspaper editor recently turned down an Op-Ed about foreign policy he had commissioned from me, explaining sadly that his bosses "want All Monica All the Time."

The third country of the American mind, the partisan think tank network centered in Washington, D.C., resembles nothing so much as a totalitarian state like North Korea. Think tanks may look like universities or research institutes, "little magazines" may resemble scholarly journals, but they are really mere fronts in a cultural apparatus that is kept strictly subordinated to the goals of a political party or an ideological faction.

In the Media Republic, the overseers seek publicity; in Thinktankia, the apparatchiks seek ideological uniformity. Every word, every thought is supposed to repay the foundation subsidy or corporate grant by promoting the Revolution—be it the Social Democratic Revolution or the Reagan Revolution. In the apocalyptic struggle, words and ideas are weapons, and truth must be sacrificed to the Revolution's success. The people who run ideological journals and think tanks usually have the souls of commissars (not least the "libertarians"). Naturally, like any totalitarian state, the partisan think tank network is riddled by conspiracies and periodically shaken up by show trials of dissidents and sudden coups against leaders. (The purges in the think tank world are about principle; those in the media world, about profit; and those in the academic world, about prestige).

Book publishing in fin-de-siècle America is not so much a sovereign state in its own right as a war-torn country occupied and divided into spheres of influence by external powers—rather like China in the last century. For example, many of the public-policy potboilers in recent years, like Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education* and Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve,* have been subsidized by ideological think tanks (usually on the right).

Most prestige fiction and poetry exists in the university's zone of occupation. Many of the books that win prizes and good reviews in the right venues are read by few people, but that hardly matters, as they are designed to go directly from the publisher to the classroom, after the briefest of decent intervals in the bookstore. A similar trend has manifested itself in the visual arts, now that many museums, by commissioning "installations," have rendered the private patron unnecessary.

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is the academic book that nobody writes. Most of my professor friends plead guilty to the practice of stealing footnotes from other academics and using them without having read the cited texts. I am sure it is only a matter of time before some academic writer invents the Virtual Book—a book that exists only as a footnote. The virtual author, who is too busy to write the book, will be paired with the virtual reader, who is too busy to read it. The invention of virtual literature would spare everyone time and effort, while leaving the factories of reputation and scholarship in the academic-industrial complex virtually unchanged.

Nearby in the partitioned territory of book publishing, the zone occupied by the media provides a haven for quite different kinds of books. Already the typical work of commercial fiction is, in the words of a New York trade editor I know, a "pre-screenplay." In nonfiction, synergy is maximized when the same story or idea can appear, more or less simultaneously, as a magazine article, a book, and a motion picture. A quote from former *New Yorker* editor Tina Brown about Harvey Weinstein of Miramax defies parody: "I feel that the kinds of movies he makes are the kind of journalism we try to do." Soon journalists may be evaluated by how much they contribute to selling the plastic toys in McDonald's Happy Meals that are timed to coincide with synergistic movie-TV-book-magazine Events.

The No-Man's-Land in book publishing between the media and academic zones is home to the memoir—a tabloid genre that passes itself off as high art. Once upon a time, writers wrote stories and novels about people unlike themselves. Then, for a generation or two, they were told to write about people resembling themselves. Finally, by the 1990s, agents and editors were encouraging young writers to drop fiction altogether and write about the subject dearest to their hearts, themselves. This has helped not only those few writers who are fortunate (or accursed) enough to have personal lives that are stranger than fiction, but also those whose lives *are* fiction—like Bruno Doesseker, a.k.a. Binjamin Wilkomorski, a Swiss author who fabricated his identity as a Holocaust survivor. It appears that the trend in trade publishing has almost come full circle—from fiction to memoir-as-fiction to memoir to fiction-as-memoir.

A number of recent hoaxes in journalism as well as book publishing make one wonder whether something is in the air (or maybe in the ink). In all of the chin-stroking about Stephen Glass, *The New Republic* reporter who hoaxed his editors and readers for months, nobody singled out the essential factor—the growing importance, in journalism, of what might be called green-diaper babies.

Following the logic of the sweatshop/plantation economy, leading journals of opinion increasingly tend to recruit their midlevel editors from the pool of unpaid or under-paid interns, who have already proven that they have independent means. When challenged, publishers and editors will say that paying full-time living wages plus benefits to

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middle-class magazine and publishing workers is *just not feasible* (the same argument from necessity has been made throughout history by the employers of scabs, illegal aliens, children, convicts, coolies and slaves). Because only the offspring of the wealthiest two or three percent of the U.S. population can afford an unpaid or poorly-paid internship in Manhattan, Washington, D.C. or San Francisco, the talent pool for the next generation of magazine editors and writers is in danger of being reduced to green-diaper babies. Talented young Americans in their twenties and early thirties who lack gilt-edged parents, trust funds or compliant working spouses find it almost impossible to get a foot on the lowest rungs of the ladder in editing and publishing. The low wages alone explain why the New York/Washington publishing world is one of the most exclusive social clubs in the United States. There are hardly any blacks or Hispanics in elite journalism, but then for that matter there are hardly any white working-class Catholics or white middle-class Baptists. Publishing is segregated by race *because* it is segregated by class.

For economic reasons, then, today's young journalist is more likely to resemble a character out of the works of F. Scott Fitzgerald rather than one out of the works of Ben Hecht. Increasingly, American journalism is becoming the career of choice for the fresh-out-of-college overclass twit. This, by the way, explains the success of the disproportionate numbers of British expats in American journalism. If France and Russia share credit for the notion of the intelligentsia, we have Britain to thank for the Twiterati.

The characteristics of the micro-elite from which new journalists and editors are recruited go a long way toward explaining the biases that warp American media coverage of . . . America. One of those biases is the grossly disproportionate focus on the Northeast (and to a lesser extent the metropolitan West Coast). More Americans live in the South and West than in the North and East, but unless there are fires, tornados or floods, you will search in vain for news of the heartland or the Gulf Coast. Another bias is the media's neglect of entire classes, in particular the white working class and the white rural poor, about whom the media elite has derived most of its scant knowledge from *Deliverance* and "The Beverly Hillbillies." A third bias is the illusion purveyed by the media that American society is divided between the three strata most familiar to the green-diaper babies of our Fourth Estate: namely, the college-educated white overclass, the working poor (largely immigrant), whom the overclass employs, and the urban poor (largely black) whom the overclass fears and tries to avoid.

Green-diaper babies in journalism in their early or mid-twenties, if only because of their age, lack scholarly expertise and they also lack personal experience in politics, business, science, the arts, or any other field of endeavor. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that tyro journalists, given great amounts of space in magazines and newspapers to fill, are tempted to color them in with the crayons of their imaginations—as *The New Republic* learned the hard way. When *The New Republic* peaked in the

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1980s, long before my own brief stint as a senior editor, most of the writing was done by experienced, well-paid adults from diverse backgrounds like Charles Krauthammer, Morton Kondracke and Fred Barnes. In recent years, however, a growing number of pages in the magazine have been filled by recent college graduates, most of them from Harvard, who can afford to work for next to nothing. You get what you pay for, and *The New Republic* got Stephen Glass.

In my own career I have fled the boring welfare state of the university for the tyrannical party-state of the think-tank world, escaping, before I could be purged, to the corrupt and easy-going banana republic of journalism. On the basis of my experience, I believe that the differences in style among thinkers and writers in academe, the media and the think tanks reflect different institutional constraints and, especially, different economic incentives.

The greatest contrast is that found between inhabitants of the academic country, on the one hand, and the citizens of the media and think tank realms, on the other. Journalists and think-tank ideologues still write in English, whereas all successful academics, except for a few noble relics like Samuel P. Huntington and Richard Rorty, write in the post-English patois of their fields. Where possible, campus guilds have abandoned language altogether for numbers. Almost all of the significant concepts of economics can be expressed verbally, or with the use of diagrams. The triumph of mathematical economics, with its cargo-cult imitation of physics, can be explained only by the bureaucratic imperatives of the American economics professoriate. For some time, political science has been mimicking economics, by attempting to "model" the messy gang warfare that is international and domestic politics with the aid of "game theory" and "rational choice theory" (known fondly among its detractors as Rat Choice). Obscurantist methodologies have the great advantage of concealing from outsiders the banality of thinking in any discipline by which they are adopted. If you have nothing intelligent to say, you would be a fool to say it plainly.

Journalists and ideologues, as I have noted, must still write in intelligible English for non-specialist readers. It is therefore no surprise that the topics of American public discourse in recent years have usually been set either by intellectual journalists (James Fallows, Robert Kaplan or Nicholas Lemann) or scholarly generalists based in one or another think tank or public policy school (Robert Reich, Charles Murray). Their potential rivals, the professors, have obtained job security at the price of irrelevance.

Although the take-over of the universities by dozens of self-protective guilds has forced many first-rate thinkers across the borders into the media's Third World sweatshops or this or that ideological Republic of Virtue, the émigrés find life in their new countries uncertain and insecure. You might expect that the think tanks would provide better homes for American intellectuals than our pedantic universities and our

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oligarchic media. Unfortunately, the economic incentive structure of the partisan think tank discourages freedom of thought. Because the typical think-tank ideologue must get his grant renewed annually, it would be suicidal for him to challenge the party line that is set by the corporate and foundation program officers and their middlemen, the think-tank executives. A scholar who lasts forever at a place like AEI, Cato or IPS tends to have an eye on the poster wall, a finger to the wind, and an ear to the ground (yes, it's as painful as playing Twister). In theory, university professors with life tenure are in a far better position than think-tankers to challenge conventional wisdom. However, as we have seen, America's dons are too busy bricking themselves in with unreadable tomes to waste time on the thankless task of speaking truth to power in the public square.

Does the Balkanization of the American mind matter? The country can function and perhaps even flourish in spite of absurd professors, superficial preppie journalists and monomaniacal ideologues muttering in their sleep about the flat tax or the progressive tax. However, in the absence of generalist thinkers writing for a general audience, there is a danger that public policy will be monopolized by specialists who serve particular lobbies. Defense policy will be made and discussed only by members of the military-industrial mafia; interest rate policy by bankers and their representatives; labor policy by business and union lobbyists; religious policy by religious fanatics (and anti-religious fanatics). As we have seen, even the humanities can suffer, if the artistic and scholarly communities are captured by the equivalent of producer lobbies.

It is easy to identify three reforms that could unify and revitalize the three separated countries of the American mind: the abolition of tenure; outlawing unpaid and poorly-paid journalistic internships; and mandating that think-tank scholars be hired for extended periods (say, five to ten years). Abolishing tenure would weaken the campus guilds by permitting non-guild intellectuals to replace the deadwood at major universities. Outlawing unpaid and poorly-paid journalistic internships, and mandating that all magazine and publishing employees be paid full-time, adult, middle-class salaries with generous benefits, would shift the average age of magazine workers upward, while moving their average socio-economic origins downward from the hereditary overclass toward the center of gravity of the educated middle class. (If a decent-pay requirement drives a few journalistic sweatshops into bankruptcy, well, progress has a price). Finally, extended contracts for think-tank scholars would give them a little more independence from result-oriented donors, without encouraging monastic vices like sloth and acedia the way that life tenure for professors has done.

Will these reforms be enacted? No. Will they even be widely discussed? No. Therefore American intellectual life, for the foreseeable future, will continue to be partitioned between the country of the pedant, the country of the twit, and the country of the commissar.

MICHAEL LIND

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IVAN BUNIN

Rusya

Sometime around 11:00 P.M. the Moscow-Sevastopol express made an unscheduled stop at a small station past Podolsk and stood waiting for something on the other track. A couple riding in first class leaned toward an open window; outside a conductor was walking on the rails with a red lantern slung over his arm.

"Why have we stopped?" the lady asked abruptly.

The conductor explained that another train that used their line was running late; they had to wait for it.

It was already dark and sad at the station. The sun had set long ago, but in the west, beyond the station and the black, wooded fields, the dying light of Moscow's summer dusk remained. Moist air from the marshes drifted through the open windows; and in the silence, one could hear the steady, monotonous screech of a landrail—somehow the sound seemed as damp as the air.

The man propped his elbows up on the window; the woman leaned against his shoulder.

"I stayed here once during summer vacation when I was a student," he said. "I was a tutor at an estate about five *versts* from here. It's a boring place—a sparse forest and a lot of magpies. Mosquitoes. Dragonflies. And no good view of the land. If you really wanted to look at the horizon, you had to go to the house, up to the mezzanine. The house had been built in the fashion of most summer estates, but the family had fallen on hard times, and it was badly rundown. Behind it there was something you could call a garden, and beyond that there was something you couldn't call a lake, but couldn't call a swamp either—just a mass of weeds and water lilies and, of course, a flat-bottomed boat near a muddy bank."

"And of course a girl who's dying from boredom at her dacha until you start paddling her around the swamp."

"Yes—everything according to plan. Only the girl wasn't bored at all. And I took her out in the boat at night most of the time. It

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was really rather poetic. The sky in the west stayed a strange, transparent green all night, and something always seemed to be smoldering on the horizon, just as it is now . . . I could only find one oar, and it was like a shovel, so I had to paddle like a savage—first the right side, then the left. On the other bank it was dark from the forest, but behind the trees that strange half-light glowed all night. And everywhere it was unbelievably quiet—only the mosquitoes whined and the dragonflies buzzed past. I never thought they flew at night, but it turns out they do for some reason—the noise they make is downright frightening."

They finally heard the other train rumbling toward them. A breeze rose as it flew by, and the lights in the passing cars blended into a long, golden streak. Then the express lurched forward; an attendant entered the couple's compartment, turned on the lights and began to make their beds.

"So what happened with you and that girl? A full-blown affair? For some reason you've never mentioned her before. What was she like?"

"Skinny, tall. She wore a yellow sarafan, a sleeveless cotton tunic. And peasant shoes that had been woven from different colored wools."

"One of those girls who likes a very 'Russian' style . . ."

"I think it was more a poor woman's style. She never had anything to wear other than that dress. She was an artist—studied painting at the Stroganovskii School for Fine Arts. And she looked like something from a painting, from an icon even—a braid of black hair down her back, a dark face with a few freckles, a thin nose. Her eyes and eyebrows were black . . . And her hair was thick and dry, slightly curly. Her features and her skin looked very beautiful against the yellow cotton and the white sleeves of her blouse. I remember how her ankles and the tops of her feet always seemed very fragile. The skin over them was so delicate you could see her bones."

"I know that type. I had a girlfriend at school like that. Very prone to hysterics, right?"

"Maybe. Her face was a lot like her mother's, and her mother suffered from terrible depression. She was some kind of princess by birth, had Eastern blood. She'd only come out of her room for meals. She'd come out, sit down—and dead silence. Maybe she'd cough, but she'd never looked up from her plate—just shifted her

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knife and fork around from one place to another. And if she did suddenly say something, she'd shout out her words and we'd all jump."

"And the father?"

"He was pretty silent too. Very tall and very removed—a retired military man. But their son was sweet—he's the one I tutored."

The attendant said their beds were ready, wished them good night and left the compartment.

"And what was her name?"

"Rusya."

"What kind of name is that?"

"Very simple—Marya, Marusya."

"And so—you were really in love with her?"

"Terribly in love. At least that's how it seemed at the time."

"And she?"

He fell silent for a moment, then answered dryly:

"She probably thought the same thing. But let's go to bed—I'm exhausted."

"Oh, very nice! You've just gotten me interested! Come on—tell me in two words how it ended."

"It ended in nothing. I left and it was over."

"And why didn't you marry her?"

"Evidently I had a premonition that I'd meet you."

"Really?"

"No. Actually, I shot myself, and she stabbed herself with a dagger."

Having washed their faces and brushed their teeth, the man and the woman locked themselves into the compartment, which seemed to grow more cluttered in the dark, and lay down on their separate beds, feeling that joy all travelers experience when they finally touch fresh linen sheets and rest their heads on those lustrous pillows that always slip down from the slightly raised end of the berth.

A blue night-light glowed above the door, as if quietly watching over the cabin. She quickly dozed off, but he was unable to sleep, and lay smoking, returning to that summer in his thoughts.

She had small, dark freckles on her stomach and her back as well—and they delighted him. Because she wore soft shoes without heels, her whole body seemed to sway under the yellow sarafan when she walked. The sarafan was light and loose-fitting,

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and her girlish figure moved freely under it. Once her feet had been soaked by the rain as she ran from the garden to the living room: he took off her shoes, kissed the narrow, wet soles of her feet—and there had never been such happiness in his life. Everyone had gone to sleep in the darkened house after lunch; more and more fresh-smelling rain was pouring over the patio beyond the open doors—and how terribly that rooster frightened them as he too ran from the garden into the living room, his black feathers shot with a strange, metallic green, his claws clicking on the floor at the very moment when they'd lost themselves and let all caution go. Seeing how they jumped up from the couch, the rooster ducked his head, as if embarrassed, and politely trotted back into the rain with his shimmering tail drawn down . . .

In the beginning she would scrutinize him constantly; if he spoke, she would blush darkly and mutter something droll; at meals she liked to tease him, saying loudly to her father:

"Don't give him any, Papa. He doesn't like dumplings. He doesn't like kvass either, or pasta. He despises yogurt too, and he hates cottage cheese."

He was busy with his pupil in the mornings, and she had chores to do—the entire household depended on her. They would have lunch at one, and then she would go to her room on the mezzanine or, if it wasn't raining, to the garden, where she'd paint the landscape, waving off mosquitoes as she stood before her easel under the birches. Then she began to come out on the balcony, where he usually sat reading in a cane-backed chair after lunch. She would stand with her hands behind her back and look at him as if she were about to laugh.

"Can I ask what subtleties you're absorbed in today?"

"The history of the French Revolution."

"Oh my! I didn't realize that we have a revolutionary in the house!"

"Why aren't you painting?"

"My lack of talent is becoming too obvious. I'm about to quit for good."

"Why don't you show me some of your pictures?"

"Why? Do you think you know something about painting?"

"You're awfully proud, you know."

"Yes, that's a flaw of mine."

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One day she finally suggested that they take the boat out on the lake. "It looks like the rainy season has ended in this little jungle of ours," she said decisively. "Let's play while we have the chance. Of course, our boat is rotting, and it's full of holes, but Petya and I have stopped up the floor with marsh weeds."

It was a stifling afternoon; hot damp air had settled like a sheet on the grass flecked with buttercups along the shore; pale green moths hovered lazily above the flowers. As they walked to the boat, he began to speak in the same mocking tone that she'd adopted so consistently with him:

"You've finally climbed down from your pedestal to visit me!"

"And you've finally figured out a way to talk to me," she answered happily as she jumped into the bow, and startled frogs splashed into the water all around them. Suddenly she screamed, pulled the sarafan above her knees, and started stamping:

"A snake! A snake!"

He glimpsed the wet, dark skin of her calves as he grabbed the oar from the bow; then he struck the grass snake coiled in the bottom of the boat and flung it out into the lake.

She had turned pale with a kind of Indian pallor, and the contrast made her freckles seem darker, her hair and eyes even blacker.

"How disgusting!" she said. "It's no wonder the devil took the form of a snake. They're everywhere around here—in the garden, under the house. And Petya picks them up with his hands! Can you believe it!"

It was the first time she'd spoken to him openly; the first time they looked straight into one another's eyes.

"But you were quick! You hit him perfectly!"

Relaxed again, she smiled as she scampered from the bow and sat down in the stern. The beauty she'd revealed in her terror had stunned him; now he thought, "Yes, she's still only a girl." But even as he tried to appear nonchalant, he stepped carefully in the boat, stuck his oar into the gelatinous bottom of the lake, swung the bow forward and began to pole through the tangled weeds, the tufts of marsh grass and the blooming lilies that layered the surface with their broad, flat leaves. When they finally reached open water, he sat down on the bench in the middle of the boat and began rowing, first on the right, then on the left side.

"This is nice, isn't it?" she shouted.

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"Yes, very nice!" he answered, taking off his cap and turning toward her. "Would you mind keeping this near you—I'm afraid I'll knock it into the bottom of this wreck—it's full of leeches, you know—and it still leaks."

She put the cap on her knee.

"Don't worry about it—just put it somewhere dry up there."

She hugged the hat against her chest:

"No—I'm going to guard it!"

Tenderness welled up in his heart again, but he turned away and started rowing harder in the water that shimmered between the lilies and the weeds.

Mosquitoes began to bite his hands and face, and the silver glare of the lake was blinding . . . Humid air and a shifting band of sunlight . . . Thin, white strands of clouds shining in the sky and on the water-glades among the leafy islands . . . It was shallow everywhere, and he could see marsh grass growing on the bottom of the lake, but the water's depth seemed infinite with the sky and the clouds reflected across its surface. Suddenly she screamed again, and they began to tip: she had reached down from the stern toward a lily, grabbed its stem and pulled so hard that the boat heaved to one side and she began to fall—he barely had time to lunge forward and catch her under the arms. She burst out laughing, fell into the bow, and flicked the water from her hand straight into his eyes. Then he grabbed her again and suddenly, without knowing what he was doing, he kissed her lips as she laughed. She put her arms around his neck and clumsily kissed his cheek . . .

From that time on they started boating on the lake at night.

The next day she called him into the garden after lunch.

"Do you love me?"

Remembering the way they'd kissed in the boat, he answered earnestly:

"From the first day we met."

"And I," she said, "—No, I hated you at first because you never noticed me. But that's over now, thank God. When everyone goes to bed tonight, go down to the lake and wait for me. Only be careful—sneak out quietly. Mama watches everything I do—she's insanely jealous."

That night she came to the shore carrying a blanket.

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"What's that for?" he asked, flustered by the joy he felt at seeing her.

"You're so silly—we're bound to get cold. Let's hurry—get in and row us over to the other shore."

They crossed the lake without speaking.

"O.K., that's good," she said as the boat neared the forest on the other bank. "Now come here. Where's the blanket? Oh, I'm sitting on it. Wrap it around me—I'm freezing. And sit here. No, you see, we didn't kiss right yesterday. Now I'll kiss you first, very softly. Just put your arms around me . . . anywhere . . . "

Under the sarafan she was wearing only a camisole. Tenderly, barely touching him, she kissed the edges of his lips. He felt as if his head were spinning as he pushed her back into the stern, and she pressed herself against him . . .

Afterwards they lay resting quietly in the boat. Then she sat up and smiled in a way that expressed both happiness and lingering pain.

"Now we're husband and wife," she said. "Mama says she won't survive if I get married, but I don't want to think about that now . . . You know what? I'm going swimming. I love to at night."

Her long, thin body looked pale in the gloom when she pulled off her dress and began to wrap her braid around her head, exposing her underarms and making her breasts rise as she reached up; she was not at all embarrassed by her nakedness or the dark hair below her belly. Finished with her braid, she kissed him lightly, jumped onto her feet, and splashed into the lake. Holding her head out of the water, she kicked loudly as she swam.

Then he hurriedly helped her dress and wrapped her up in the blanket. Her eyes and her black hair, still tied in a braid, stood out sharply in the dim light. He didn't dare to touch her anymore; he only kissed her hands and sat without talking, seized by an almost unbearable joy. Sometimes they heard a light rustling in the leaves, and it seemed that someone was standing among the black trees and the scattered lights of the fireflies on the bank—standing and listening to them. She raised her head:

"Wait, what was that?"

"Don't worry, it's probably a frog going up the bank. Or a hedgehog in the woods."

"But what if it's a goat?"

"What goat?"

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"I don't know. But just imagine it: a goat comes out of the forest and stands there and watches us . . . Oh, I'm so happy I just feel like saying stupid things!"

He pressed her hands to his lips again, then solemnly kissed her cold, damp breast. How suddenly she'd changed, become a wholly different creature in his eyes! The green summer twilight had not gone out; it was still glowing beyond the darkened forest, still hanging on the calm, pale surface of the lake. A sharp scent like the smell of celery rose from the dew-soaked weeds along the bank; the whining sound of the mosquitoes turned tentative, almost pleading—and terrifying, sleepless dragonflies darted over the water and the boat with their delicate, crackling wings, their bodies shining in the dead of night. And still, still something rustled in the leaves, crawled, picked its way carefully among the roots . . .

A week later he was disgraced, thrown out of the house and forbidden to see her again. The scandal and their sudden, violent separation left him stunned.

They had been sitting in the living room after lunch, their heads lightly touching as they looked at the pictures in old issues of *Field*.

"Do you still love me?" he asked, pretending to study the drawings.

"Silly, you're so silly," she whispered.

Suddenly they heard someone running lightly toward the room, and her half-mad mother appeared at the threshold in a tattered black dressing gown and leather slippers. She rushed at them like an actress making her entrance on stage, her black eyes flashing with a tragic light.

"I know everything! I felt it! I've been watching you! I won't let you take her, you bastard!"

She flung up her hand and fired a deafening shot from the ancient pistol that Petya had used to frighten sparrows—there was only powder in the gun. He jumped at her through the smoke and grabbed her arm, but she wrenched free, and hit him in the forehead with the pistol. Then she threw the gun at him and started shouting even more theatrically as blood trickled down his face, and the others in the house ran toward the noise.

"You'll have to step over my body to leave this house with her!" she screamed, her lips flecked with foam. "I'll hang myself the day

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you take her! Do you hear—I'll hang myself! I'll throw myself off the roof! Get out you bastard—get out of this house! You choose, Marya Viktorovna—choose! Him or your mother!"

"You, Mama," she whispered, "you" . . .

He came back to himself and opened his eyes—the blue night-light above the door was still staring at him with morbid curiosity in the darkness, and the car was still rocking on its springs as the train flew inexorably forward. Already that sad little stop was far away, far back in the distance. And twenty years had passed since he first saw those thickets of trees, those magpies and the swamp, the lilies and the grass snakes and the cranes . . . Yes, there were cranes—how could he have forgotten them! Like so much of that summer, they were a mystery—that pair that appeared occasionally on the banks of the swamp and allowed only her to approach them, bending their long, delicate necks and watching with curiosity and suspicion as softly she moved closer in her woven shoes, and finally sat before them, her yellow sarafan spreading out over the wet, warm grass; with childlike wonder she would study their eyes, look into the menacing and beautiful blackness of those pupils ringed by dark grey irises. Watching her and the cranes through binoculars, he could clearly see the birds' small, brilliant heads, the delicate slits of their nares, and the bony, powerful beaks with which they killed grass snakes in one blow. The feathers that thickly covered their torsos and their airy tails glinted like steel, and their legs—one pair black, the other green—resembled long, scaly reeds. Sometimes each bird would stand on just one leg, remaining inexplicably still for hours; then, for no apparent reason, one of them would begin to hop and stretch its massive wings, while the other bobbed its head and took slow, measured steps with an air of self-importance, clutching its feet into tight balls as it lifted them, then spreading them apart like a raptor's talons in the air. But still, when she ran toward those cranes, he thought of nothing—saw nothing—but her yellow sarafan spreading out over the grass; and the thought of her dark body—the dark freckles on her skin beneath that sarafan—filled him with such painful longing that he shuddered. On that last day, during the last moments in which they sat together on the couch with an old copy of *Field,* she was holding his cap again, and she hugged it against her chest just as she had in the boat. Her black eyes were shining with joy when

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she said, "I love you so much that nothing's dearer to me now than the smell of this hat—the smell of your hair and your hideous cologne!"

*

He was drinking coffee and cognac in the restaurant car after breakfast as the train rolled on somewhere past Kursk.

"Why are you drinking so much?" his wife asked. "That's already your fifth, isn't it? Are you still sad? Still pining for your dacha girl with the bony feet?"

"Still sad, still sad," he answered with an unpleasant smile. "The dacha girl . . . *Amata nobis quantum amabitur nulla!*"[1]

"Is that Latin? What does it mean?"

"You don't need to know."

"You're so rude," she said as she sighed and began staring out the sunlit window.

27 September 1940

[*Translated from the Russian by Graham Hettlinger*]

[1] Beloved by us as no other shall be!

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BRIAN COX

Ted Hughes (1930–1998): A Personal Retrospect

On 30th October 1998, the day after Ted Hughes died, two poets, Ruth Padel and Lachlan Mackinnon, published obituary essays in the British newspaper, *The Independent*. Padel wrote that Hughes's controversial series of poems, *Crow* (1970), "is his masterpiece because it flows directly from myth at work in himself." Mackinnon said that among Hughes's poems *Wodwo* (1967) still has some spectacular moments but is distinctively uneven, while *Crow* is "his spectacular worst." He called the sequence "a caricaturist's scream of horror."

Among critics and poets such major disagreements about Hughes's poetry are commonplace. In an obituary essay in *The Times Literary Supplement* of November 13th, 1998, John Bayley found *Gaudete* (1977) "not only an astonishingly vivid mystic drama but an outburst of manic happiness which reminded me of Christopher Smart and his *Song to David*." In his *Lives of the Poets* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1998), published only a few weeks before Hughes died, Michael Schmidt reflects the more usual view: the language of *Gaudete* is "overwrought, laboriously alliterative and assonantal, larded with adjectives . . . " These disagreements reflect two very different responses to Hughes's vision. Some readers admire individual poems, but feel unsympathetic to what he is trying to say; others are convinced by his insights, by his mythical power.

As I look back over the years—forty-seven years—I have been meeting him, publishing his poetry, teaching and arguing about it, my problem is that I distrust his underlying values, his obsession with the beauty and violence of the natural world, his belief in its redemptive energy. I too admire many individual poems, and in my view their total number makes him a great poet. Wordsworth's long life included much pedestrian work, and the same is true of Ted Hughes. Many readers share my uncertainties,

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tempering admiration for his extraordinarily vivid accounts of the natural world with dislike for his constant use of overwrought rhetoric.

His famous poem, "Thrushes," shows him at his best and his worst. The poem begins with a powerful evocation of the ruthlessness of thrushes:

> Terrifying are the attent sleek thrushes on the lawn,
> More coiled steel than living—a poised
> Dark deadly eye, those delicate legs
> Triggered to stirrings beyond sense—with a start, a bounce,
> a stab
> Overtake the instant and drag out some writhing thing.[1]

But the poem then proceeds to reject the procrastinations of civilized man and to compare the thrushes' "bullet and automatic purpose" to the genius of Mozart. The poem ends with a piece of rant:

> how loud and above what
> Furious spaces of fire do the distracting devils
> Orgy and hosannah, under what wilderness
> Of black silent waters weep.

The comparison between thrush and Mozart leaves so many questions unanswered. Is there really a similarity, except in the most superficial sense, between the thrush's concentration on killing and the creative genius of Mozart?

I found Ted a strange mixture, a man of great benevolence and natural kindness which at times seemed in conflict with the mythology of his poems. I first met him in 1951 when he came up to Pembroke College, Cambridge, to read English. I was starting my third undergraduate year, and as I stayed on for postgraduate study I saw him regularly during his three years at Pembroke. We were a small community. In those days undergraduates usually dined in hall for breakfast, lunch and dinner; those of us in passionate love with literature argued over the long wooden

[1] Ted Hughes, *New Selected Poems 1957–1994* (London, 1995), pp. 39–40. All references to poems are to this edition.

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tables about Shakespeare or Donne or Dickens meal by meal. I learnt more from such engagements than from formal teaching. All the colleges, except Girton and Newnham, were male only. In the Cambridge of the early 1950s male students outnumbered females by about twenty to one. The College gates were locked at 10:00 P.M. If you returned after 10:00 P.M. you paid a fine of twopence; after 11:00 P.M. it was fourpence. If you came back after midnight you could try climbing over the spikes on the back gates or face an interview with your tutor in the morning.

In spite of these restrictions most of us were happy beyond measure. We were the children of war, accustomed to air raids at night and the terror of bombing. I recall thinking that the greatest happiness in life would be to retire to bed at night knowing there would be no air raid. After the war ended we were all conscripted, with only few exceptions, and we spent two years in the armed forces often with little to do and much boredom in camps from Yorkshire to Germany to Egypt. Ted passed his time as an RAF ground wireless mechanic in East Yorkshire. Its landscapes enter early poems such as "Mayday in Holderness," in which he recalls "Hull's sunset smudge," the river Humber "melting eastward":

> The North Sea lies soundless. Beneath it
> Smoulder the wars: to heart-beats, bomb, bayonet.
> "Mother, Mother!" cries the pierced helmet.
> Cordite oozings of Gallipoli,
>
> Curded to beastings, broached my palate,
> The expressionless gaze of the leopard,
> The coils of the sleeping anaconda,
> The nightlong frenzy of shrews.

Memories of war lay deep in our imaginations and haunted our dreams. Ted had not only suffered as a child from the noisy bedlam of air raids, but his father, who survived Gallipoli, talked obsessively about the carnage of the First World War.

I'm convinced that Ted was happy at Pembroke. He created an easy friendliness with Matthew Hodgart, his supervisor for English studies, who recognized Ted's exceptional talent, even if Ted didn't always complete the obligatory weekly essay. Pembroke was

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a place of tolerance and good manners, and one side of Ted fitted in very well. In later years he spoke often with nostalgia of the events and friends of those student years. Later he became an Honorary Fellow of the College, where his good manners made him immediately welcome. Yet as an undergraduate he was a rebel. He created a considerable reputation as a man rather than as a poet. In those Leavis dominated years, so unsympathetic to the early work of young writers, I never found out he wrote verse. Craggily handsome, he radiated an extraordinary dynamism, a power and integrity which later made his public readings so impressive. He has often been compared to Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights.* He was already fascinated by the Ouija board and the occult, and there were Pembroke stories about the frightening intensity with which he engaged in these activities.

We shared the same tutor, Tony Camps, at that time a shy bachelor in his thirties with a slight stammer which we all imitated. He later married an American, much to our astonishment, and was eventually elected Master of the College. Tony was the ideal bachelor tutor, regularly inviting his students to tea in his rooms, immensely supportive to young men from working-class backgrounds trying to find their feet in Cambridge. Ted caused him numerous problems. On one occasion Ted's bedmaker visited him to complain that Mr. Hughes had painted bacchanalian orgies on his ceiling. On arrival at the room Tony stretched out full-length on the floor, and spent several minutes observing the work of art. He then stood up and told Ted the ceiling would have to be whitewashed at his expense. On another occasion late at night a porter informed him that Mr. Hughes was entertaining a lady in his rooms. Tony struggled over to the room, in the older part of the college, and knocked on the heavy door. After a few moments it opened slowly to reveal Ted stark naked with his arms outstretched like a cross. "Crucify me," Ted demanded.

Apart from these undergraduate pranks, Ted was developing that commitment to myths of power which later underpinned his extraordinary theories about drama in his *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992). He believed passionately that all human beings possess hidden powers of soul and body which repressive modern rationalism has stolen from us. His later efforts to encourage children to write

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their own poems and stories reflected this belief in secret untapped energies.

In his anthology of poems and programs for children originally prepared for radio, *Poetry in the Making* (Faber, 1967), he recounts how as a boy brought up in Yorkshire he had a passion for capturing animals, fishes and birds. At Mexborough Grammar School his friends were town boys, sons of colliers and railwaymen, and with them he had one life; but all the time he lived a quite different, solitary existence, pursuing wild creatures in the countryside. In later life he still possessed diaries for those years; they recorded nothing but his catches. About the age of fifteen, as this enthusiasm waned, he started writing poems. He explained that, for him, capturing animals and writing poems have much in common.

> . . . I think of poems as a sort of animal. They have their own life, like animals, by which I mean that they seem quite separate from any person, even from their author, and nothing can be added to them or taken away without maiming and perhaps even killing them. And they have a certain wisdom. They know something special . . . something perhaps which we are very curious to learn. Maybe my concern has been to capture not animals particularly and not poems, but simply things which have a vivid life of their own, outside mine.

In his first two books, *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957) and *Lupercal* (1960), his words capture with a vivid immediacy the essence of a thrush, a pike, an otter or a hawk. In these creatures he found a dynamic energy which he thought lacking in most human beings, a mysterious, spontaneous power which he found deeply attractive.

After two years at Pembroke he decided—as the system allowed—to abandon English studies and to read Archaeology and Anthropology. Before public readings of his famous poem, "The Thought-Fox," he often gave this account of the strange dream which provoked this change of heart. During the day he had been struggling unsuccessfully to complete an essay of literary criticism. That night in a dream a fox appeared the size of a wolf. It placed its hand—a bleeding human hand—flat palm down on the blank space of his page, saying; "Stop this—*you are destroying us.*" As it lifted its hand away he saw the blood-print, wet, glistening blood on the page. The next day he decided to take the Tripos in

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Archaeology and Anthropology. When the dream recurred the fox nodded its head approvingly.

I saw less of Ted after this transfer, and after we both left Pembroke in 1954 it was five years before we met again. After graduation he worked as teacher, rose gardener, zookeeper and night watchman, devoting himself to his poems. He met Sylvia Plath in 1955, and they were married in 1956. A spell in the United States included time at Yaddo, the writers' retreat, but Ted was not at ease in the States, and they returned to London. Sylvia had entered Ted's first book, *The Hawk in the Rain*, published by Faber in 1957, for the prestigious First Publication Award in an Anglo-American contest sponsored by The Poetry Center of the Young Men's & Young Women's Hebrew Association, in New York City, and judged by W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender and Marianne Moore. The winning of this award attracted much attention, and at that time his status as a poet far outshadowed that of Sylvia.

Tony Dyson came up to Pembroke College to read English in my year, and we became close friends. In 1959 we decided to start a new literary magazine, *Critical Quarterly*. We were both impressed by *The Hawk in the Rain*, and we persuaded Ted to contribute three poems to our second issue, including one of his most famous, "Hawk Roosting." In subsequent years he published over forty poems in our journal; among them were "Lupercalia," "Pibroch," "Skylarks," and "Crow Blacker than Ever." He also wrote essays for us on Keith Douglas, Janos Pilinszky and Sylvia Plath's *Crossing the Water*.

In our third issue in 1959, we featured his poem "The Casualty," and accompanied this with an essay by Tony Dyson which claimed that "Ted Hughes's voice is the most distinctive we have heard in poetry since Dylan Thomas and this, in itself, marks him out—especially since he is swimming against the prevailing currents of detachment, irony, urbanity and Neo-Augustan influences generally." Tony went on to commit himself by saying that Ted Hughes "will be one of the select few to be read a hundred years from now." (*Critical Quarterly*, I, 3, pp. 219–226) This was written after Ted had published only one book; it was probably the first academic article to claim greatness for Ted Hughes, and, not surprisingly, he was very appreciative.

In his essay Tony addressed the crucial problem about which in

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subsequent years other critics have so often disagreed. What is Hughes really saying about the power and destructive energy of his creatures? Tony writes:

> The major theme in the poems is power; and power thought of not morally, or in time, but absolutely—in a present which is often violent and self-destructive, but isolated from motive and consequence, and so unmodified by the irony which time confers. For Ted Hughes power and violence go together: his own dark gods are makers of the tiger, not the lamb. He is fascinated by violence of all kinds, in love and in hatred, in the jungle and the arena, in battle, murder and sudden death. Violence, for him, is the occasion not for reflection, but for *being*... there is a constant striving towards moments of significance.... Ted Hughes values such moments for their intensity; but he has to isolate them from past and future, cause and effect, reflection and evaluation, before he can savour them to the full. Hence the absence of compassion, anger, humility, nostalgia, disgust and the other attitudes belonging to the perspectives of time. His intelligence is often wholly absorbed in the battle to embody moments of power in words: it is the purity of intoxication, not the complexities of hang-over, that engage him ...

For me, this is a dangerous intoxication. In "Hawk Roosting," there is a relish, a thrill of pleasure, in killing:

> I kill where I please because it is all mine.
> There is no sophistry in my body:
> My manners are tearing off heads—

Hughes's supporters say this is the hawk speaking, not Hughes. Others—and I am one of them—find this intoxication comparable to the joy of killing in D.H. Lawrence's *The Plumed Serpent*, something I find nauseating. As Tony Dyson says, the poem seems to be expressing those moments of being which are actively sought by Hughes. I have to admit that the poem has considerable linguistic power.

In 1960 we offered a small poetry prize for authors who had not previously published a book of verse. Tony and I were joined by Philip Larkin for the judging. We shared the prize between Alan Brownjohn and an unknown called Sylvia Plath. In those days Guinness awarded an annual prize for the best poem of the year, with a splendid celebratory party at which black velvet (Guinness and champagne) was served. In 1960 the prize was won by

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Thomas Blackburn for "The Sediment," which we had published in *Critical Quarterly*, so we were invited to the party. There I first met Sylvia, who was gratified to find that we awarded our prize before we knew that she was Ted's wife. She then edited one of our poetry pamphlets for us, *American Poetry Now*. I asked her to choose a small selection of recent poems by American poets who might not be well-known in Britain. Among poets she chose were Howard Nemerov, William Stafford, Denise Levertov, Adrienne Rich, Robert Creeley, Anne Sexton and W.D. Snodgrass. Robert Lowell was not included because his work was readily available in Britain. The collection sold thousands of copies, mainly to teachers in our schools.

I found Sylvia Plath balanced, mature, and full of *joie de vivre*. Once, on entering an Angus Steak restaurant in central London, she walked straight over to discuss the meat with the cook. In the early 1960s I had not visited the States, and I had met hardly any American women, and so I took Sylvia's eloquence and vivacity at face value. As an editor she was most efficient, ringing me up regularly to discuss her selection of poets and the various printing problems. The technical skill of her early poems in *The Colossus*, with their formal control of her personal anguish, reflects the persona she created for herself after her early attempt at suicide. I only met her in the company of Ted, and like many acquaintances was thoroughly taken in by her bright manners.

When I visited London, Tony and I used to take Ted and Sylvia out to dinner to eat some of the *Critical Quarterly* profits. In 1960 and 1961 we saw a good deal of them; Ted was always willing to offer constructive advice about our literary ventures. In 1962 they agreed to read their poems at our summer conference for teachers of English at Bangor in Wales. We understood that they would take over Tony's Bangor flat for a few days' holiday, while Sylvia's mother looked after the children. As late July approached, Tony and I became worried because our letters were not answered; at the last minute they got in touch, but only stayed one night in Tony's flat. Before the reading we took them to Beaumarais in Anglesey for dinner. At first they seemed strained, but as the red wine flowed we all relaxed, and the laughter and conviviality of our earlier dinners were restored. They must have separated permanently only a few weeks later. When in February 1963, Tony rang me up during a tutorial at Hull University to tell

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me that Sylvia had committed suicide, I found it almost unbelievable. I was too overcome to continue with the tutorial and asked the students to leave. I sat in my room, very still, too conscious of the silence. I kept thinking of Judge Brack's absurd remark after Hedda Gabler shot herself: "People don't do such things."

I didn't meet Ted again until late July. Tony and I were organizing one of our conferences for teachers at Exeter, and Ted invited us with Malcolm Bradbury to his house in North Tawton in Devon. We drank tea on a hot afternoon in a garden overgrown with weeds, and no one mentioned Sylvia. There were some embarrassing silences, and eventually Ted encouraged his father, who was present, to tell once more his stories of Gallipoli. Ted's two little children, Frieda (three) and Nicholas (one and a half), made a nuisance of themselves. At that time I had three small children of my own, so I practiced newly developed skills to keep them quiet. We played ball near the house while the conversation on the grass continued. I acknowledge the symbolism of the scene. The teacher of poetry plays with the children while the poet and his father relive their sufferings.

Ted continued to read occasionally for me in Manchester where I had been appointed to a Chair, but we never talked about Sylvia. Once he came with Assia Wevill, for whom he had deserted Sylvia, and she seemed strangely on edge when we recalled our Pembroke days. When she gassed herself and Shura, her daughter by Ted, I had no words, only wonder at his ability to survive.

The creatures in his poems became mythological figures—a green wolf, ghost crabs, wodwo, a troll of the forest in *Wodwo* (1967). This process continued in *Crow* (1970), which I chose as my book of the year in the British newspaper, *The Sunday Telegraph*, and which I regard as an extraordinary work of genius. I can see why Lachlan Mackinnon dislikes its extravagant rhetoric. Many of the poems are too intense, too much an assault on the reader, but I still believe that these poems include some of his greatest. Ted once told me that perhaps he should not have published the book because the sequence was incomplete. He wondered whether he could finish it, but said it would take him months to feel his way back into the state of mind which produced *Crow*.

In this series of poems Hughes's intoxication with violence has been overtaken by disgust. The crow in some ways is a real

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crow—a scavenger with a pantomime ghoulishness, an undertaker's sleekness. But it also represents the spirit of creation, haphazard, irrational, cruel. The horror expressed by these poems is for me the true response to suffering and killing, and that is why I agree with Ruth Padel that the poems flow directly from myth at work in himself, a myth now overwhelmed by the nightmares which Hughes had been forced to endure.

In 1971, we published in the spring issue of *Critical Quarterly* an article by David Lodge which confirmed my own belief that these poems are a work of genius. The Crow sequence is an attempt to create a new mythology, or, more precisely, to revise the Christian myth. Hughes described Crow as created by God's nightmare. Lodge writes:

> On its much smaller scale, *Crow* imitates the scope of the Bible, covering the history of the world from beginning to end, from Genesis to Apocalypse, and taking in on the way the universal human themes: birth, copulation and death; language, art, science; love and war; nature and the city.

Stylistically, he points out, the sequence often echoes the Bible and associated Christian liturgical forms, such as genealogies, catechisms, litanies and chants. Crow engages in weird, comitragic confrontations with God, who has good intentions but remains ineffective:

> God tried to teach Crow how to talk.
> "Love," said God. "Say, Love."
> Crow gaped, and the white shark crashed into the sea
> And went rolling downwards, discovering its own depth."
>
> "Crow's First Lesson"

Lodge writes about these poems:

> Crow, in short, is the beast of a very modern apocalypse, one in which images of global disaster and individual violence take absurd and grotesque and debased forms that derive as much from contemporary mass culture as from literary tradition. . . . Crow serves Hughes as Sweeney served Eliot or Crazy Jane served Yeats. The adapted cartoon-style conventionalises the experience, frames it ironically, puts it at a

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> distance and thus makes it manageable. . . . the language has a vernacular robustness, often making use of colloquialism and slang.

Crow is a trickster, a survivor, and his exploits are presented with macabre gaiety. The hysteria is controlled by a tone of mockery, of sardonic wit. In "Apple Tragedy," my favorite among the poems and one in which Crow does not appear, the story of the Garden of Eden is told in a manner which is both frightening and farcical:

> Now whenever the snake appears she screeches
> "Here it comes again! Help! O help!"
> Then Adam smashes a chair on its head,
> And God says: "I am well pleased."
>
> And everything goes to hell.

These extraordinary poems give the impression of rapid improvisation, and perhaps the total effect depends on reading them together as a unit. After the tragedies of his personal life, Hughes overcomes despair with this great cry of anger and disgust. Like Crow, he survives.

After *Crow* Hughes found it very difficult to develop a new style. My own conviction is that in the period before the last two years of his life he wrote several of his best poems, but that much of his writing, particularly *Gaudete*, reads like a pastiche of his own work. In 1970 he married Carol Orchard, and this time he enjoyed a successful and happy marriage which lasted over twenty-five years until his death. Carol is a woman of great charm, dignity and intelligence. I recall that soon after the marriage I entertained them both to lunch in Manchester before Ted read his poems to my students. They were completely absorbed by each other, like traditional young lovers. By that time I had been married over sixteen years, and I felt like an interloper.

Carol's father, Jack Orchard, owned a farm in Devon, and Ted's rehabilitation was helped by daily work in the fields. He explained at readings in the 1980s that to move on from the nightmare of *Crow* he kept a diary where he recorded the facts of daily farm life as a means of once more releasing his creative energy. The best-known of these diary poems is "February 17th,"

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which was published in *Moortown Diary* (1989). The poem describes in graphic detail a difficult birth during which he had to cut off the head of a lamb in the womb in order to help the sheep to push out the foetus and so save its life:

> Sliced the lamb's throat-strings, levered with a knife
> Between the vertebrae and brought the head off
> To stare at its mother, its pipes sitting in the mud
> With all earth for a body.

Before Ted addressed my students, he told me, with a relish which reminded me of his undergraduate days, that he was keeping a count of the number of students who passed out during his reading of the poem.

Other poems from this period express a great joy in nature which shows the extent to which Ted had recovered from the nightmare of *Crow*. Among his best poems are "The Harvest Moon" in *Season Songs* (1976) and a buoyant lighthearted tribute to a local football game, "Football at Slack," in *Remains of Elmet* (1979):

> Between plunging valleys, on a bareback of hill
> Men in bunting colours
> Bounced, and their blown ball bounced.
>
> The blown ball jumped, and the merry-coloured men
> Spouted like water to head it.
> The ball blew away downwind—
>
> The rubbery men bounced after it.

At this time after a reading he wrote in my teen-age daughter's copy of his latest book: "Give me a wise father and throw me on the dunghill." I wondered whether this was ambiguous until he later pointed out that it was an adaptation of Napoleon's famous remark about good luck.

In 1984 Ted was appointed the British poet laureate. I have always thought his acceptance of this honor was a mistake. The poet laureate is required to write poems to celebrate royal occasions—births, marriages, deaths. Ted was an ardent royalist,

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who believed that the Queen acts as a symbol for the unity of the tribe, but almost all the occasional poems he wrote are bad. The exception is "Rain-Charm for the Duchy" written for Prince Harry but really about violent rain after a period of drought. I often wondered how he coped with the Royal Family. On one occasion when I was Chair of the Arvon Foundation (an institution which organizes courses in creative writing which Ted helped to found), we decided to ask Prince Charles to act as our Patron, a sure way of increasing the grants made to us by charities. Ted forwarded the application, and we went together to St. James's Palace to meet a junior member of the Prince's staff. He kept us waiting half an hour, and then we chatted pleasantly over tea. About two months later our request was rejected. I have met Prince Charles at a small seminar, and respect him as a well-intentioned man of moderate abilities with little understanding of common life. For me a great poet is a vastly superior person, and I wondered how Ted had coped with the inherited arrogance of the royals.

My own contacts with Ted in his late years came in 1994 when I became Chair of the Arvon Foundation. In the early 1980s I had founded the Association for Verbal Arts. Ted signed the manifesto, and read his poems at a Manchester conference to launch the project. He was willing to take on major administrative responsibilities to promote writing. For over thirty years he served as one of the judges of the W.H. Smith annual Children's Literary Competition. In a letter of 1993 (Ted sent me a copy) to the Chairman of a British examination body which had cut back its creative writing options, he wrote that "properly taught creative writing is a rigorous discipline that calls on the activity of the whole mind, incidentally releasing enormous energy for other classroom purposes." In Britain, of course, most higher education courses in English literature demand only literary criticism from students, and there is no provision for creative work. After I received a formal invitation to chair the Arvon Foundation, I received a wonderful card from Ted saying that "we're all praying you'll accept."

Sadly for me, at my last meeting with Ted in early 1997 we had a sharp disagreement. A senior member of the Arvon Council belonged to the right-wing Carlton Club in London. Ted and I met there to thrash out our problems under a fearsome large portrait of Mrs. Thatcher.

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The disagreement concerned the future development of the creative writing courses run by Arvon at its three centers in Devon, Yorkshire and North Scotland. The courses were usually fully-booked, and I argued they could be replicated elsewhere, perhaps in colleges of education. Ted argued that the dormitories at Totleigh Barton in Devon were an essential characteristic of the "magic" of an Arvon course. Facilities at Arvon houses were quite primitive and often at Totleigh six people shared a room. Ted believed this experience broke down conventional barriers; it forced people to remove their shells and liberate their repressed energies. I wanted to get rid of the dormitories, and I argued that great art might just as well come from an apartment with an *en suite* bathroom. I could tell this remark made Ted cross.

With characteristic kindness Ted followed this meeting by sending me a long handwritten letter of about 1,500 words to explain his point of view. He wrote:

> Enforced physical closeness of students—dormitory beds, shared cooking etc. dismantles the self-defences very quickly without which the psychological self-revelation, the inner metamorphosis, can't happen. What students etc. call "the Arvon magic" is the peculiar atmosphere—very intense and a bit entranced—created by these circumstances. Maybe the regression to primal tiny group cave-life accelerates the break-down of the crust and the access to deeper responses. If this very peculiar atmosphere failed to materialise, the students wouldn't call anything "magic" and they'd have nothing to show—except maybe a few more of their routine exercises.
>
> So Arvon "magic" is actually the euphoric real chemistry created quite mechanically, in a way, by a quite specific but, as I say very odd practical method. It's survived and flourished as it has for only one reason—it works. The experimental variations have not survived because they didn't work.
>
> Can this method (which produces the dreaded everybody-around-the-cauldron "magic") be institutionalised?

I find this letter very revealing. Its concern with suppressed powers and energies links together the undergraduate I first met in 1951 with the mature man at the Carlton Club in 1997.

In his last two years Ted published *Birthday Letters* (1998), with its honest painful recollections of his relationship with Sylvia, and *Tales from Ovid* (1997); in London's West End his translation of Racine's *Phèdre* is currently playing with Diana Rigg as Phèdre. All of them often show him at his best, and it is a strange and

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wonderful fact that after years of mixed success he should write so brilliantly just before he died. I tend to agree with Ruth Padel that the reworkings of Ovid are very successful in depicting love gone wrong, bodies tragically changed, with his own experience flowing through and changing the tone of Ovid's Latin. She finds in *Birthday Letters* too much explanation, not enough original language. Michael Schmidt thinks this collection "a partial triumph, lacking in intimacy, a confession which must assert and reassert its sincerity, a candour that wants to be believed." He finds in these poems a largely matter-of-fact prosody "working against Hughes's cadential instincts" (*Lives of the Poets*). I am unsure. My own personal memories are too powerful to suppress when I try to judge these poems, and I find them profoundly moving.

Ted was a great man, whose physical presence changed the atmosphere of any meeting. He had a unique integrity. He was a major critic and a wonderful spinner of stories for children. He wrote at least fifty poems which will be read and enjoyed for centuries to come.

I have just edited a collection of essays for Manchester University Press and the Book Trust, *Literacy Is Not Enough*, about the importance of books and the need for the British government's utilitarian policies for literacy to be radically altered. In February 1998, Ted agreed to contribute, but after the deadline there was no essay or reply to my letters. When it was revealed that he had contracted cancer in 1997, I realized why.

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JOSEPH EPSTEIN

The Medical Keats

The Good Soldier, Ford Madox Ford's fine novel of 1915, sometimes known as the best French novel in the English language, was originally to be titled *The Saddest Story*. A novel about betrayal among friends and within marriages, Ford thought this the saddest story. I think he was wrong. A far sadder story is that of the death of the young: all that life unlived, all that potential unrealized, all hopes short-circuited and permanently cut off. It is not only sad but unspeakably sad.

The only thing sadder, perhaps, is the death of a young man or woman of talent, not to speak of proven genius. Mozart (1756–1791), as everyone knows, died at the age of thirty-five, Schubert (1797–1828) at thirty-one, Mendelssohn (1809–1847) at thirty-eight. Van Gogh (1853–1890) made it only to thirty-seven. Any casualty list in science has to include the Indian mathematician, Srinivasa Ramanujan (1887–1920), who pegged out at thirty-three. In literature, Shelley (1792–1822) died at thirty, by drowning; Heinrich von Kleist (1777–1811) died by his own hand at thirty-four; Alexander Sergevich Pushkin (1799–1837), at the hand of another in a duel, died at thirty-eight; and F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896–1940), with a strong assist going to the bottle, achieved only his forty-fourth birthday. Sad stories, grievous sad stories, all.

But, somehow, the saddest of all these sad stories, is that of John Keats (1795–1821), who left the earth, astonishingly gifted, feeling himself deeply unfulfilled and sorely disappointed at the age of twenty-five. Should anyone ever lapse into the belief that perfect justice is available here on earth, ten seconds' contemplation of the life of John Keats ought to suffice to put that thought permanently out of one's mind. The very cause behind Keats's death was, in any calculus of justice, all wrong: he was infected with tuberculosis—then known of course as consumption—while in a condition of low resistance after returning from a trip in

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Scotland to attend to his brother Tom, himself in an advanced consumptive state. He died, in other words, out of an act of purely selfless good. He also died in pellucid awareness that his great promise had not come to fruition. What he couldn't know, of course, was that, in substantial part, it already had, though he may have had slight intimations of this.

A truism has it that there are no Mozarts in literature. What this means, of course, is that literary talent does not develop anywhere near so quickly as musical talent—and, I gather, in certain fields (mathematics most notable among them), so quickly as scientific talent. Talent can also be spotted in music and visual art and in science much earlier than in literature. Talent in literature requires a lengthy, sometimes a substantially lengthy, period of fermentation. Time is required to mature those powers of observation, discrimination, formulation, and moral imagination central to the literary gift. Very few writers come into anything like full possession of this gift until well into their thirties, and often much later. Joseph Conrad completed his first novel, *Almayer's Folly*, at thirty-eight; the contemporary novelist Penelope Fitzgerald, I believe, began publishing at sixty.

Lyrical talent, and poetic talent generally, may show up rather earlier than other kinds of literary talent. But Jack Stillinger, in his introduction to the most recent edition of Keats's poems, remarks that the great figures in the pantheon of English poetry would be unknown today if they had died as early as did John Keats. "Of the half-dozen other most highly regarded English poets," he notes, "only Spenser, who died in his later forties, did not live at least twice as long as Keats." Professor Stillinger reminds us that Chaucer and Shakespeare made it into their fifties and Milton died at sixty-five. Wordsworth and Yeats survived until, respectively, eighty and seventy-three, with Yeats's best work done in the last fifteen years of his life. What might John Keats have done had he been allotted a normal life span?

John Keats was born in 1795, the oldest of what would eventually be the four sons (one of whom died in infancy) and one daughter of Thomas and Frances Keats. Thomas Keats took over the successful livery stables owned by his in-laws, a family named Jennings. He was on his way to making them more successful still when, on the night of April 16, 1804, he was thrown

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from his horse, was later found on the street by a night watchman, and died a few hours thereafter. Thomas Keats was then thirty years old, his son John not yet nine, his youngest child, his daughter Fanny, less than a year old.

If Keats's father was thrown from his horse, Keats's mother was thrown by this accident from life, never really to recover. Nor did her family, which henceforth lived in permanent disarray. Frances Keats abandoned her family for an unfortunate second marriage, a mere two months after her husband's death, which, under English marital law of the day, denied her children their legal patrimony. Her second marriage ended in separation two years later. Meanwhile the Keats children, essentially orphaned, lived with their grandparents. The original plan was to send the Keats boys to Harrow, but this had to be abandoned, when their maternal grandfather, with whom the children were living, died in 1805. Five years later, their mother would die, of what has since been thought tuberculosis, which would eventually kill Keats's youngest brother Tom in 1819 and eventually John Keats himself at his lodgings at 26 Piazza di Spagna, in Rome and, later still, kill his brother George, then in his early forties, in Louisville, Kentucky.

John Keats was sent to the Enfield School, which offered a liberal education for the sons of families in trade who were not expected to go on to university. Andrew Motion, Keats's most recent biographer, refers to the school's Dissenting liberal tendency.[1] If less scholarly in its teaching than the great English public schools, Enfield also offered less in the way of punishment and no "fagging," that cruel English public-school system of making young students essentially hostage to older students. A certain scientific underpinning accompanied much of the learning at the school, at which more science was taught than a boy was likely to encounter at Eton or Winchester. Liberal politics combined with science, and one of the principal teachers at Enfield, a man named John Rylan, was a friend to Joseph Priestly, the chemist who discovered oxygen and who was one of the best-known radical reformers of the day.

Like so many artists, Keats was not a notably good student, at least not at the outset. Small though he was—he would never

[1] KEATS, by *Andrew Motion*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. $35.00.

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grow much above five feet—he was noted for his courage, had a taste for prankishness, was known for his ready laughter. He had a masculine hardiness that made him well liked in an all male society. A classmate, Edward Holmes, himself later to become a music critic and the author of a biography of Mozart, recalled John Keats as "a boy whom any one . . . might have fancied would have become great—*but rather in some military capacity than in literature.*"

Then, for reasons not at all clear, when he returned to Enfield School in 1810, after the death of his mother, John Keats caught intellectual fire and became a passionate reader. His taste in reading ran to Latin writers, history, travel writing, and mythology, though as another of his biographers, W. Jackson Bate, remarks, the young John Keats never became quite "bookish, in any usual sense of the word." What his reading showed, according to Bate, were his qualities of character, which made for "a union of energy, courage, and absorption in something outside himself."

Not long after the death of his mother, Keats was removed from school by his legal guardian, a skullduggerous (as he proved) tea merchant named Richard Abbey, who thought that, at fifteen, it was time for the boy to go out into the world. He and Abbey agreed on his taking up a career in medicine, and he was apprenticed to work with an apothecary-surgeon, one Thomas Hammond, a neighbor, for a period that was supposed to continue for five years and for a fee of £210, which covered board and lodgings.

What Keats's motives were in studying medicine are not known with any certainty. We do know that, when his mother lay dying, he took up the exclusive nursing of her, caring for her in all ways, reading novels to her, offering what comforts he could. We know, too, that, in his last years at the Enfield School, he showed an aptitude for science, and two of the books he won as academic prizes were on scientific subjects. The boy Keats had, moreover, a winning streak of altruism, and medicine, then as now, provided every chance to do good. Finally, let us not preclude snobbery. In later years, Keats wrote, apropos of his brother George's departure for America, that there at least he wouldn't have to work "in trade." "I would sooner [my brother] should till the ground, than bow to a customer."

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Trade medicine might not be, but neither was Keats able to consider the prospect of practicing medicine at what might be called its highest social level. The division of early nineteenth-century medicine was tri-part. According to Donald Goellnicht, who has written about Keats and medicine in his excellent book *The Poet-Physician*, at the upper level were the physicians, who had earned degrees at Oxford and Cambridge and Edinburgh. Wealthy themselves, the high fees they charged made their services accessible only to the well-off and privileged. The rest of the nation fell under the care of surgeons and apothecaries.

Surgeons were originally joined with barbers in the Guild of Barbers and Surgeons and only separated from them in 1745, when they formed the Corporation of Surgeons and, in 1800, the Royal College of Surgeons. The responsibilities of surgeons and apothecaries often seemed to blur—except that surgeons were formally examined and required licenses to practice. But the duties of the apothecaries, who were initially part of the Guild of Grocers, seemed quite as wide as those of surgeons in the diagnosis and treatment of disease, if not wider in that they also of course compounded and dispensed medicines.

By the time his medical training commenced, at the age of fifteen, John Keats's life was just about three-fifths complete. Reading Keats, in both his poems and his letters, one is always aware of a dark foreshadowing—and that dark shadow is, of course, the death that looms so near in his future. By force of the most direct experience (the early death of his parents, the death of his grandparents, the death of his brother Tom at the age of 19, when Keats was himself only 23), he was—he could scarcely have been otherwise—deeply death-minded. Unlike most people in their early twenties, death, for Keats, was no abstraction; it did not exist, as it does for many people even well into their middle age, in that most comfortable of psychological tenses, the happily distant future. His medical training, both with Thomas Hammond and as a student at Guy's Hospital in London, where he saw death on a daily basis and in many of its most unattractive forms, could only have deepened the sense of the potential imminence of death for Keats. Although outwardly gregarious and cheerful, always the boon companion, he spoke of his own "horrid Morbidity"; and his brother George remarked on his "nervous morbid temperament."

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For reasons we do not know, Keats spent four instead of five years living with Thomas Hammond before he enrolled at the medical school attached to Guy's Hospital. All indications are that Hammond was a serious and successful and highly competent medical practitioner. The training of an apprentice was heavily weighted in favor of the practical. Donald Goellnicht thinks it likely that, under Thomas Hammond's tutelage, Keats learned how to spot the symptoms of various common diseases as well as how to compound their remedies. He probably also learned how to set broken bones, pull teeth, deliver babies, and do bleedings, either by leech or venesection, that is, by opening veins.

In *Keats as Doctor and Patient*, his brief book of 1938, Sir William Hale-White, himself then a consulting physician to Guy's, reminds his readers that when Keats entered medical school, the school still trafficked with body snatchers to acquire corpses for dissection (a practice prohibited by the Anatomy Act of 1832). Anesthesiology was unknown; rum tended to be the chief anesthetic. Donald Goellnicht quotes the description of a contemporary, an uncle of William Osler, on the condition of the dissecting room at Guy's:

> On entering the room, the stink was most abominable. About 20 chaps were at work, carving limbs and bodies, in all stages of putrefaction, & of all colors; black, green, yellow, blue, while the pupils carved them, apparently, with as much pleasure as they would carve their dinners. One was pouring Ol. Terebinth on his subject, & amused himself with striking with his scalpel at the maggots, as they issued from their retreats.

Antisepsis, too, was unheard of, so that, as Dr. Hale-White reports, "almost every wound was or quickly became a foul-smelling, festering sore, the dressing of which had to be frequently changed, often more than once a day." This was usually done by the medical students appointed as "dressers."

Keats would probably not have gone to medical school at Guy's at all but for the passage in Parliament, in 1815, near the conclusion of his apprenticeship, of the Apothecaries Act. The Act made it necessary for anyone who wished to practice medicine in England or Wales first to pass an examination before a newly organized Court of Examiners of the Society of Apothecaries. To sit for this examination, one had to have, along with the comple-

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tion of a five-year apprenticeship, at least six months' study and work in a teaching hospital. Six months would earn one a Licentiate; a full year's study was required for membership in the Royal College of Surgeons. Although he would end up with a Licentiateship, Keats signed on for a year's study at Guy's Hospital, which was connected with the then more famous and nearby St. Thomas's Hospital. Signing on for a year suggests that, at the outset at least, Keats intended to become an apothecary-surgeon.

The men then teaching at Guy's were of generally high quality as was, for its day, the institution itself. Guy's and St. Thomas's were thought, in the view of a French medical visitor, to be better than any hospital then in France. When Keats entered, new facilities had just been installed. More important, the practice of medicine there had shifted from the airily theoretical to the notably practical. "Nothing is known in our profession by guess," remarked Astley Cooper, then the most distinguished teacher at Guy's, "and I do not believe that from the first dawn of medical science to the present moment, a single correct idea has emanated from conjecture alone." Medical education at Guy's even had a philosophical tone, following not only the most recent developments in science generally but taking up, in lectures, the larger and deeper issues that these developments raised.

Three surgeons were on the staff at Guy's. First among equals was Astley Cooper, whom Hale-White describes as "a great teacher, an investigator, a bold and brilliant surgeon . . . he was always willing to help students and doctors and had a wonderful gift of remembering them and all about them even if he had not seen them for years." Cooper had an international following; and though a mere surgeon, and not a physician, he was called in to treat the king and eventually knighted. His lectures were later published by one of his apprentices, and were used not only in England but in America and in Germany long after his death. John Flint South, who was a student at Guy's at the same time that Keats was, has left a description of Astley Cooper as lecturer:

> A few moments before two Astley Cooper came briskly through the crowd, his handsome face beaming with delight and animation. He was dressed in black, with short knee-breeches and silk stockings, which well displayed his handsome legs, of which he was not a little

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> proud. Almost to a minute he was in the theatre, where loud and continued greetings most truly declared the affectionate regard his pupils had for him. His clear silvery voice and cheery conversational manner soon exhausted the conventional hour devoted to the lecture; and all who heard him hung with silent attention on his words, the only sounds which broke the quiet being the subdued pen-scratching of the note-takers . . . as he only talked of what he really knew from his own experience, what he taught was to be implicitly trusted.

Unfortunately, Keats was assigned to the poorest surgeon in the hospital, William Lucas, Jr., a tall, awkward man, deaf and entirely misfit, by brains and aptitude, for medicine. Of Lucas, Hale-White notes: "His surgical acquirements were very small, his operations generally very badly performed and accompanied by much bungling if not worse." Astley Cooper himself remarked of Lucas as a surgeon: "he was neat-handed, but rash in the extreme, cutting amongst most important parts as though they were only skin, and making us all shudder from the apprehension of his opening arteries or committing some other error." Astley Cooper often backed up Lucas, in the hope of saving any patient from his colleague's deep and dreadful incompetence.

Keats much admired Astley Cooper, and it is tempting to speculate how his medical career—and indeed his life—might have turned out if he had come more directly under his influence instead of that of the egregious "Billy" Lucas. Yet Keats seems not to have had the instinct necessary to the surgeon. According to his friend Charles Brown, neither had he the temperament for it. "My last operation was the opening of a man's temporal artery," Keats told Brown. "I did it with the utmost nicety; but reflecting on what passed through my mind at the time, my dexterity seemed a miracle, and I never took up the lancet again."

Keats was a good if not thoroughly interested medical student. His lecture notebooks, while always grasping the main points, allowed room for the critical spirit, as when he noted: "In disease Medical Men guess, if they cannot ascertain a disease they call it nervous." Fellow students noted his growing inattention at lectures on anatomy, physiology, medicine, chemistry, and *materia medica*, or the botanical study then necessary to pharmacology. His lecture notes, now on display at the Keats Museum at Hampstead, are said to show much doodling of flowers and fruit

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and occasional squibs of verse—and a few renderings of skulls thrown in for good measure. In a fellow student's notebook he scribbled: "Give me women, wine and snuff / Until I cry out 'hold, enough!' / You may do so sans objection / Until the day of resurrection." He had begun to affect Byronic dress, wearing a soft, turned-down collar and loose kerchief at his neck and sporting a moustache. The skirmish between the poet and the doctor had begun in earnest in John Keats.

While apprenticed to Thomas Hammond, Keats kept up his connection with Enfield School by studying three afternoons a week with Charles Cowden Clarke, son of the school's headmaster. During this period, Keats's education took, for the first time, a distinctly literary turn. He completed a prose version of the *Aeneid*, began reading Spenser, read Milton and Byron, and Tasso in translation; and, through reading the journalist-poet Leigh Hunt's paper *The Examiner*, which Clarke had introduced to him, became politicized, on the side of radicalism. He was eighteen and a half when he attempted his first poem, a poor imitation of Spenser.

"Medicine is my lawful wife, and literature my mistress," Chekhov, another writer-physician, once remarked, adding, "When I get tired of one, I spend the night with the other." It was apparently not in John Keats to keep these same two loves going simultaneously. (Astley Cooper told his students, *contra* Chekhov, that medicine was a jealous mistress, and that to succeed in it required "zeal and industry," undiverted by one's being "multivarious or vacillating in [one's] pursuits.") Keats had become very apprehensive about doing major surgery on his own—after witnessing the butcheries of William Lucas, Jr., no surprise here. But in a more general way, his mind tended to stray from medical study. "The other day, for instance," he told his friend Cowden Clarke, "during a lecture, there came a sunbeam into the room, and with it a whole troop of creatures floating in the ray; and I was off with them to Oberon and fairyland."

Ethan Canin, a young novelist of our day, has recently recounted how, though he had planned a career as a surgeon, he discovered in his third year in medical school that he could not keep his mind on the job. His first real rotation in surgery was with heart patients. "I remember leaning in close," he writes, "while the vilest thing I had ever seen—the breaking of a man's

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chest—was performed by two surgeons, on either side of the table. The sternum was first split with an electric saw; then a steel spreader was inserted and its gears opened like a bear trap and revealed the shining organs inside, pulsing to a steady beat. That beat was where we were going."

Enthralled and terrified though he was, where Canin's mind really wanted to go was fly fishing. "My job," he writes, "was to hold the suction wand that pulled the blood out of the operating field. I was standing there one day, dreaming of water, of standing waist-deep in a sun-drenched pond in the woods, of arcing a frog-green popper across the cloudless New England sky. . . ." It is at such moments that one learns—or one had damn well better learn—that one is not intended to be a surgeon, and probably not a physician either. Canin has since dropped medicine to write full time.

Yet even riven in his interests, John Keats did well on his examination for an apothecary license. Because of the extra expense of obtaining a license to practice in London—and Keats had money problems throughout his brief life—he sat for a license that would allow him to practice exclusively in the country. The examination was a serious one, covering four general fields of study: the *Pharmocopeia Officinalis Britannica* (or a translation thereof) and general prescriptions, pharmaceutical chemistry, *materia medica*, and the theory and practice of medicine. He passed them all.

Robert Gittings underscores, in his biography of Keats, that, "in view of a tendency to play down Keats's medical ability, what a real achievement this was." The first year the Licentiate exam was given, 188 candidates applied. Ten were thought inadequately prepared even to take the examination, and another eleven were turned down on the day of the exam. During the examination itself, one of seven who took it failed. Gittings writes: "Keats had satisfied an exacting body in every way." The one catch was that, having taken his examination in 1816, at the age of twenty, he had still to wait nearly another year to begin practice, and that year would prove crucial.

And yet, for all the work he had put in, for all the financial pressure upon him to begin earning a living, for all that he respected medicine as a useful pursuit and a channel for doing good, John Keats never, officially, practiced medicine a single day.

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His guardian Richard Abbey called Keats in for an account of his plans. According to Keats's friend and publisher John Taylor:

> it was Mr. Abbey's advice that John commence business at Tottenham as a Surgeon. He communicated his plans to his Ward, but his surprise was not moderate, to hear in reply that he did not intend to be a Surgeon! why what do you mean to be? I mean to rely upon my ability as a Poet—John you are either Mad or a Fool to talk in so absurd a Manner. My Mind is made up said the youngster very quickly. I know that I possess abilities greater than most men, and therefore I am determined to gain my living by exercising them. Seeing nothing could be done Abbey called him a Silly Boy and prophesied a speedy Termination to his inconsiderate enterprise.

"It is difficult to know why Keats left medicine," writes Donald Goellnicht, who then proceeds to run down the possible reasons. He refutes Dr. Hale-White's view that Keats's was too delicate a nature to face the gruesome medical conditions of the day, arguing that Keats would scarcely have put himself through a full six years of expensive training, only to come to this conclusion at the end of the ordeal. True, he knew that he didn't have it in him to be a surgeon, with its requirements, in Astley Cooper's words, of "a good Eye, a steady hand, and above all a Mind which is not easily ruffled by circumstances which may occur during the Operation." It's possible that his fear of "doing evil" with a scalpel in hand, as he remarked to his friend Charles Brown, forced him to abandon his earlier plan. Yet there was still the possibility of earning his living doing apothecary work exclusively.

Medicine was in no way distasteful to Keats, and his good young mind appears to have been capacious enough to have applied himself diligently to his studies even with his mind half on poetry. But Cowden Clarke, in the autumn of 1816, had introduced Keats to Leigh Hunt and Benjamin Haydon, the painter. Through the Leigh Hunt circle he would soon meet Percy Bysshe Shelley and William Hazlitt (the only contemporary literary man of whom Keats spoke with unstinting admiration). Hunt, in a piece in his own paper, wrote in praise of the youthful poetry of Keats and Shelley and John Reynolds, allowing Keats to think himself an authentic poet. He caught the virus, caught it, one suspects, bad. I speak of the virus of art, which causes its victims to believe that nothing in the world is finally so enticing, so exhilarating, so

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exalting, as the creation of art. It is a virus, allow me to add, for which medicine has not discovered a cure.

But John Keats, being John Keats, apparently could not do anything out of purely selfish motive, even if he wished. When he left medicine for poetry, Keats tended to regard the latter, poetry, as itself a form of medicine—that is to say, of doing good—by other means. Walter Jackson Bate quotes two lines from a passage that Keats had deleted from his long and uncompleted poem *Hyperion*, which run: "sure a poet is a sage; /A humanist, Physician to all men."

But then John Keats was a young man of remarkable character. He was one of the few writers of the front rank who appears not to have been flawed by selfishness, solipsism, or the least meanness. He was a sweet character, a young man of natural—I do not say preternatural—goodness, large-hearted with a fine generosity of spirit. He was the sort of young man who, living on the financial edge himself, arranges to loan money to friends. He had a highly developed sense of honor and an instinctive hatred of injustice. In one of his letters, he mentions having to stop, while running an errand, to thrash a butcher's boy whom he discovered torturing a cat.

Very much one of the boys—he smoked cigars, had a taste for claret and snuff; enjoyed jokes, not all of them, so to say, on-color; he played billiards, went to boxing matches, cockfights, bearbaitings; was a hesitant but not entirely inactive ladies' man (there is speculation that he had syphilis)—John Keats gave off that spark that seemed to convince all whom he met that they were in the presence of a young man who was much out of the ordinary. He was broad-shouldered and muscular; Leigh Hunt, in describing him, wrote that "every feature was at once strongly cut and delicately alive." His eyes were large and gave off a melancholy glow, his brown hair ended in ringlets, his mouth was at once sensitive and slightly pugnacious. This orphan would, I think, have been every life-loving man's notion of a fine son or younger brother.

Owing to the general decrease in death brought about by medicine as it entered the nineteenth century, the prestige of medical workers was beginning to rise when Keats studied medicine. But the profession had not yet risen so high that, from a more aristocratic *coin de vantage*, it couldn't be used against a

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man. When Keats's second book of poetry was published, it was laid into by the Tory press, and nowhere with greater brutality than by one John Lockhart in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, who assigned Keats to the school of Cockney poets, and used his medical training against him for comic effect. Lockhart, signing himself anonymously as Z, wrote:

> His friends, we understand, destined him to the career of medicine, and he was bound apprentice some years ago to a worthy apothecary in town. But all has been undone by a sudden attack of the malady to which we have alluded [the insane belief that anyone can write poetry]. Whether Mr. John had been home with a diuretic or composing draught to some patient far gone in the poetical mania, we have not heard. This much is certain, that he has caught the infection, and that thoroughly. For some time we were in hopes that he might get off with a violent fit or two; but of late the symptoms are terrible. The phrenzy of the *Poems* was bad enough in its way; but it did not alarm us half so seriously as the calm, settled, imperturable drivelling idiocy of *Endymion*. We hope, however, that in so young a person, and with a constitution originally so good, even now the disease is not utterly incurable.

The boys played hardball in those days. Byron, who was not a great admirer of Keats's poetry—he called it "a sort of mental masturbation"—seemed, in later years, ready to believe Shelley when he claimed that this and other harsh reviews threw Keats into such a state of agony that his "sufferings at length produced a rupture of a blood vessel in the lungs [leading to] the usual process of consumption." Shelley put roughly the same story about in "Adonais," his elegy for Keats. Bad medicine, this is even worse psychology.

Keats knew the political motivation behind *Blackwood's* and other mean-spirited reviews of his work. While he did not take pleasure in it, neither did he allow it to throw him, at least not for long. "Praise or blame," he wrote to his publisher, "has but a momentary effect on the man whose love of beauty in the abstract makes him a severe critic of his own Works." Keats was too tough to be greatly daunted by criticism, and one wonders if his training in medicine, where he saw genuine suffering, didn't contribute to this. Walking the halls of Guy's had its recompense.

John Keats is part of the tradition of writers who have studied medicine, and their numbers include, among the most famous,

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Rabelais, Sir Thomas Browne, Tobias Smollett, Oliver Goldsmith, George Crabbe, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., Anton Pavelevich Chekhov, Arthur Conan Doyle, Robert Bridges, Somerset Maugham (who, like Keats, never practiced), William Carlos Williams, and Walker Percy. A wildly disparate group they are, but what unites them is that they had all seen life *in extremis*, seen men and women in fear and in bravery, in selfishness and in astonishing selflessness, up close and not merely personal but indeed beneath the skin.

In some of these men, their medical training and experience is obvious in their work. Rabelais's blatant comic concentration on body parts is only the most obvious example. "I don't doubt that the study of the medical sciences seriously affected my literary work," said Chekhov; "they enlarged the field of my observations, enriched me with knowledge, the true value of which for me as a writer can be understood only by one who is himself a physician."

One of the things one discovers in reading—and in reading about—John Keats is how very impressionable, both intellectually and artistically, he tended to be. Keats read intensely, passionately, as if there were no tomorrow, which, in his case, alas, there scarcely was. He did not so much view visual art as devour it. When Benjamin Haydon took him to see the Elgin Marbles, those portions of the Parthenon frieze that Lord Elgin had brought to England, Keats was blown away; viewing them with a doctor's eye, he was much taken with what seemed to him the anatomical perfection of the figures. "He went again and again to see the Elgin Marbles," wrote his friend the painter Joseph Severn, "and would sit for an hour or more at a time beside them rapt in attention."

Robert Gittings, in another of his books on Keats, *John Keats: The Living Year, 1818–1819*, demonstrates how immediately and sometimes directly Keats put his reading into his writing. Gittings shows how when Keats read Spenser, he took over the nine-line Spenserian stanza for his own narrative poem, "The Eve of St. Agnes." Reading Dryden's fables and his translation of Ovid, he picked up Drydenesque imagery for a sonnet he was himself working on at the time. He used, as Gittings shows, Robert Burton's great idiosyncratic work *The Anatomy of Melancholy* as a regular fount of ideas, and took over some passages and phrases nearly word for word. But whether he is reading Milton or

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Shakespeare or Dante or Wordsworth or lesser writers, the results can often, with a bit of sleuthing, be found in the poetry he was working on at the time.

Any serious artist, as Henry James once pointed out, must acquire knowledge of the world well beyond his immediate experience of it. Keats acquired a vast amount of his experience from his reading. For him reading became experience itself. Where else could a man of twenty-two or -three be expected to gain it? And where better than from his education. Most of us spend a lifetime attempting, with varying degrees of success, to shed many of the ideas learned in our education. But John Keats hadn't a lifetime to spend. In his case, given his great impressionableness, this meant, to a perhaps unexampled extent, that his ideas came from his medical education. Six of his twenty-five years, after all, were spent in medical surroundings and training, and these represented more than half his intellectually conscious life.

Images from medicine suffuse Keats's poetry, and ideas learned in medical textbooks and lecture halls dominate his letters. A word here about the letters of John Keats, for Keats's reputation is based both on his poems—or perhaps on a dozen or so of his poems—and on his brilliant correspondence. Often unpunctuated, frequently misspelled, written for the most part without lengthy deliberation or revision, Keats's letters establish his claim for genius nearly as much as does his poetry. Lionel Trilling, admitting that Keats's letters, in their relation to Keats as a poet "are no more than illuminating and suggestive," goes on to write: "The fact is, however, that because of the letters it is impossible to think of Keats only as a poet—inevitably we think of him as something even more interesting than a poet, we think of him as a man, and as a certain kind of man, a hero."

The Keats letters also establish their author's intellectual *bona fides*. Keats's earlier reputation was that of a rather mindless poet utterly uninterested in the realm of the intellect, his work the result of pure poetic inspiration. But the letters give flight to such notions. "I feel more and more content every day to read," he wrote to Benjamin Haydon. "Books are becoming more interesting and valuable to me—I may say I could not live without them." In another of his letters, he wrote: "An extensive knowledge is needful to thinking people—it takes away the heat and fever; and

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helps by widening speculation to ease the Border of mystery." He found "every department of Knowledge . . . excellent and calculated toward a greater whole." This of course included medicine, for in this same letter he notes that "I am glad at not having given away my medical Books, which I shall again look over to keep alive the little I know thitherwards."

What we now know, thanks to the scholarship of Donald Goellnicht, is the debt Keats's poetry and ideas specifically owe to his medical education—and the debt is profound. Professor Goellnicht, not himself a physician, has gone back to consult the main works in chemistry, botany, anatomy, physiology, and pathology, including the lectures of Keats's teachers, and shown how central these works were to Keats's intellectual and poetic development.

Certain key words and phrases in the Keatsian vocabulary—among them, "sensation," "luxuries," "sympathy," "sublimity," "fine" and "refine," "yeast" and "yeasting," "core," "essence," "ethereal"—are taken from Keats's study of chemistry and botany, anatomy and physiology. In the formation of key metaphors as well as glancing descriptive passages, Keats availed himself of concepts first learned in his medical studies. Many of his descriptions, as Professor Goellnicht writes, "are fully comprehensible only within the context of Keats's specialized knowledge of botany." The same may be said about his specialized knowledge of chemistry, anatomy, and physiology. What is more, he always used his medical knowledge with perfect precision and acute accuracy. Where he is scientifically inaccurate—as in his imputing sexuality to flowers and plants in the manner of Linnaeus—it is because such ideas were accepted in his own day.

Keats had a special interest in the brain and the nervous system, and it is tempting to think that, had he gone into academic medicine, he might have become a first-class neurologist. He not only used the then current anatomical description of the brain—which featured globes, ridges, canals, branches, arches, and vaults—in his poems, but took the way in which the brain was thought to work to form his own idea of artistic creation. Chemistry and botany—more precisely horticulture—also contributed to this idea, but it is the sensory messages sent by the brain that are crucial to Keats's notion that good poetry should produce "sensations" in its readers, sensation acting upon imag-

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ination. His own perception of the world, as he always insisted, was based upon sensory experience rather than abstract ideas. "O for a life of sensations rather than thought!" he wrote to his friend Benjamin Bailey. And to John Reynolds he wrote: "Axioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses. We read fine things, but never feel them to the full until we have gone the same steps as the author."

Here, too, Keats is sounding a note he first heard played at Guy's Hospital—specifically on the fine pipes of Astley Cooper, who taught his students to distrust everything that they hadn't directly experienced, and above all to distrust systems. "I have made up my mind," Keats wrote to his brother and sister-in-law, "never to take any thing for granted." Where Keats and his medical school teachers may have parted company was in their strict adherence to experience alone. Science goes after truth piecemeal, drawing a line from one dot to another, one line at a time, confident that, at the end of its travail, all the dots will be connected, the picture filled in, the puzzle solved. Keats, with his artist's imagination—aided perhaps by a premonition of his own brief stay on earth—may not have been able to settle for that.

Negative Capability, an idea first revealed in a letter of Keats to his brothers in 1817, is about the need to develop the skill of learning to live with uncertainty. It is achieved, in Keats's words, "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without reaching after fact and reason. . . ." This is an idea not only temperamentally unsuited to the scientific mind—which is problem-solving and question-answering—but extremely useful to the artistic mind, which must take into account, without necessarily being fully able to explain, the mysteries of life. Not least among these mysteries are the presence of goodness and the power of evil. Beyond any doubt, Shakespeare was the writer Keats admired most, and my guess is that he did so, in large part, because Shakespeare was able directly to face and describe the many contradictions presented by life, without having to pronounce doctrinally upon them. Shakespeare, the consummate artist, has the disinterest that Keats himself yearned to have, and, for a tantalizingly brief period, appears to have acquired.

"Life must be undergone," Keats wrote to Benjamin Bailey in January of 1818, "and I certainly derive a consolation from the thought of writing one or two more Poems before it ceases." Nine

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months later John Keats would enter upon the most creative year of his abbreviated life, and compose the poems that would ensure his permanent fame. This extraordinary year began with Keats's avowal, at a gathering in his publishers' office, that there was nothing more left to do in poetry, that it was an exhausted vein of cultural endeavor, and that he was himself done with it. In the year running from September 21, 1818, to September 21, 1819, as Robert Gittings writes, "Keats wrote, with numerous other works, practically every poem that places him among the major poets of the world." The year begins and ends with the composition of *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion*, and in between are, along with much else, the great Odes to Psyche, Autumn, and a Nightingale, the Odes on a Grecian Urn, Melancholy, and Indolence along with "La Belle Dame sans Merci" and the "Sonnet to Sleep." A synthesizing maturity dominates these poems; in them, as F. R. Leavis writes, "poet and letter-writer are at last one." These poems, again to quote Leavis, are "clearly the expression of a rare maturity; the attitude is the product of tragic experience, met by discipline, in a very uncommonly strong, sincere and sensitive spirit." In short, Keats was now writing poems built—and utterly deserving—to last.

1818–1819 was for John Keats, as we now say about athletes, a career year. In literature it was the career year to end all career years. "The year . . ." W. Jackson Bate writes, "may be soberly described as the most productive in the life of any poet of the past three centuries. The mere variety in style is difficult to parallel within the same limit of time." Without the work of that year, John Keats would today be an unknown figure, as obscure a poet as his friend John Reynolds, except that, unlike Reynolds, it could not even have been said of him that he was a friend to John Keats.

How this year came about is one of those unexplained but endlessly fascinating phenomena. Matthew Arnold, writing about Maurice Guerin, notes: "In him, as in Keats . . . the temperament, the talent itself, is deeply influenced by their mysterious malady: the temperament is *devouring*; it uses vital power too hard and too fast, paying the penalty in long hours of unutterable exhaustion and premature death." Highly suggestive though that is, I myself much prefer the less mystical concluding view of Aileen Ward, yet another of Keats's biographers, which holds that "Keats earned his place in the tradition of English poetry by his courage to take

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the great dare of self-creation, his willingness to accept failure and move beyond it, his patience in learning his craft from those who could teach him." The sadness is that John Keats didn't have long to enjoy what he had achieved, for seventeen months after this astonishing creative outburst, he was dead.

For better or worse, Keats's own medical training had placed him in the position of being the first to know how grave was his illness. Throughout his letters, Keats reports contracting colds and sore throats, but in February of 1820 he began to undergo serious bleeding from his lungs. On the night of February 3, he returned home to Hampstead, telling his friend Charles Brown, with whom he was sharing quarters, that he had felt a severe chill. "But now I don't feel it. Fevered! of course a little." He took to his bed, where he coughed slightly, but in examining the stain his cough had left on the sheets, he asked Brown to bring him a candle so that he could examine it more closely. Brown recalled Keats looking at him with great—I like to think with physicianly—calm and saying: "I know the colour of that blood;—it is arterial blood; I cannot be deceived in that colour; that drop of blood is my death-warrant. I must die."

Medicine had never entirely departed Keats's mind. After he left it for poetry, he continued to diagnose and prescribe for the maladies of his friends. Cowden Clarke, afflicted with what he called "stomachic derangement," recalled Keats treating him with "a remarkable decision of opinion, describing the functions and actions of the organ with the clearness and, as I presume, technical precision of an adult practitioner." Down on his financial luck and certain it wasn't likely to change, Keats at one time thought of shipping out, as ship's doctor, on a vessel bound for India. During periods of discouragement, he thought of setting up as an apothecary. At another time, he contemplated returning to medical school—specifically, at the University of Edinburgh.

But Keats's medical training was finally to serve him most pertinently—if not efficaciously—in his own final, fatal disease. Dr. Hale-White believes that Keats "knew in his own mind . . . that his disease was mortal." Which was more than could be said for the doctors who were called in to treat him. The first to see him said that there was no "pulmonary affection" at all, and that the disease was all in his mind. The second, as Keats reported to his sister, believed that "there is nothing the matter with me except

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nervous irritability and a general weakness of the whole system which has proceeded from my anxiety of mind of late years and the too great excitement of poetry."

Yet someone must have known something serious was up, for Keats was advised not to attempt to endure the harsh English winter and to sail to Italy, which he did, on September 17, 1820, in the company of the painter Joseph Severn, who was to prove the most steadfast of friends. The trip was arduous. Bad weather and quarantines caused it to be extended to fully two-and-a-half months. A fellow passenger, a Miss Cottrell, was also suffering from tuberculosis, which Keats, with his medical eye, quickly spotted, causing him, as Aileen Ward writes, "to be faced with a living image of his own disease for the whole voyage." In fact, from his bunk, Keats, the doctor in him emerging yet again, gave Joseph Severn instructions on treating the poor woman when her condition worsened.

In Rome, Keats was put into the care of a Dr. James Clark, a good and kindly man, who again misdiagnosed Keats, believing that his trouble was in his stomach. In the approved method of the day, he had him bled, put him on a near-starvation diet, allowing him a single anchovy and piece of toast a day. (Hale-White makes plain that doctors knew so little about the diagnosis and treatment of tuberculosis in the early decades of the nineteenth century that he likens them to "extremely near-sighted people trying to grope around without glasses.") Soon Keats's hemorrhaging increased, his fever soared, he could not sleep. At one point, he reached for the laudanum he had had Severn purchase, hoping to do away with himself. Severn stopped him from doing so.

Weeks went by of increased weakening before Keats would die. He tried but could find no comfort in thoughts of an afterlife. Severn read to him, from, among other works, *Don Quixote*. Sick as he was, he characteristically worried about his friend Severn's health, prescribing medicines and exercise for him. "He is my doctor," Severn would write to John Taylor, Keats's publisher.

When the end came, Keats attempted to steel Joseph Severn for it. When he asked Severn if he had ever witnessed a death, and Severn said no, Keats replied: "Well then I pity you—poor Severn, what trouble and danger you have got into for me." When "the Distinguished Thing," as Henry James, on his own deathbed,

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called death, came at last, Keats, still the doctor, alerted Severn: "Don't be frightened—I shall die easy—be firm, and thank God it has come." One is here put in mind of the sixth stanza from "Ode to a Nightingale," which reads:

> Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
> I have been half in love with easeful Death,
> Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
> To take into the air my quiet breath;
> Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
> To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
> While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
> In such an ecstasy!
> Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
> To thy high requiem become a sod.

Some seven hours later, finally having lost the fight against drowning being waged in his own lungs, John Keats died on February 23, 1821, apparently, at the very last at least, without pain.

A few days before his death, Keats, weary of the long struggle, asked Dr. Clark, "How long will this posthumous life of mine continue?" He could not know, of course, but in another sense his posthumous life would go on forever. "I think I shall be among the English poets after my death," he wrote in 1818 to his brother and sister-in-law in America. And so today John Keats is, not merely among the English poets, but after only Shakespeare and Milton, perhaps the very greatest of them. Not at all bad, really, for a fellow who didn't quite make it through medical school.

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D. NURKSE

A Delay in Vorkuta

I'd been sick many nights
and my sheet clung to me
like a lover's body—so complicated
in its folds and twists—

but my pillow rolled itself
in a tight little ball
like a loyal child
afraid to hurt a parent.

Who filled the glass
just out of reach on the nightstand?
Who cinched the curtain even tighter,
so that I might guess at an immense city
—steeples and monuments—
in that thread of thin snow light?

Music played in another room,
always the same song
ending or beginning.

Once I heard the cry of someone suffering:
a voice that seemed to listen to itself.

Sometimes the hiss of sleet on shingles,
or bells, very faint.

Perhaps a great festival was at hand
and my long wait was over.

Sometimes a sparrow sang
in a language so difficult

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it brought tears to my eyes.
Yet I heard my father's name,
and my mother's, and mine as a child.

What hand brought me grapes
in a little china dish?
Whose voice read to me
whenever I dozed off—

the story of an immense journey,
a fortunate return, winter,
a lover grown old waiting?

The Formal Gardens at Karia

The children behind the rhododendron
threw pebbles at us:
first mica flecks,
then gravel, then stones,
missing deliberately,
by a hair, then not missing.

We the lovers
clasped on our bench
scored with strangers' names
looked up blankly,
imperious, aggrieved,
then turned back
rapt to each other.

At last we rose
with great dignity
and walked hand in hand
as slowly as possible,

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sometimes pausing to arrange
a strand of the other's hair,

past the topiary shrubs,
the busts of betrayed lovers,
the chainsmoking groundskeeper,
the fountain with its rusty pennies,

into the walled rose garden
where old couples who look alike—
as if sex had borrowed
a little from each—

feed the dusty pigeons
or read each other snippets
from Ecclesiastes, Solomon,
all the songs of ecstatic loss.

Home Before Light

Because I come from my lover's house
I try each of my keys
in my own lock.
My shirt is buttoned to my coat.

I ran back from her room
past the forge and the cemetery.
My dusty Sunday shoes
squeaked with happiness.

I knock but who could answer?
The face in the peephole
is a child's, an old man's,
or else belongs to dawn.

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LYNNE McMAHON

Not Falling

The tree was shaken from the inside
out—the party greenly winding the interior stair—
then abruptly stilled, as if
drunkenness, resting there, summoned
the suddenly weighted doubt

that cypress could support such heavy birds
as these, parting the needles with their tangled hair,
angels one thrust beyond
their mortal bearings, sixty feet above the dirt.
Fucking-A, they called down

to the ones below, and the cypress top
bent to brush a snow of moonlight on their
upturned faces.
Is it God that keeps his lunatics safe? Or merely wine
branching through the body's tree

to make of it a natural rhyme
so that five moonlit heads, clustered like
improbable fruit, could keep,
at least this time, their precious juice and postpone
an offering to that final truth.

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LUCILLE LANG DAY

Red Shoes

My mother sits in the living room,
wearing her red shoes.
"Call 911," she says.
"I'm too weak to move.
And be sure to bring my red purse
to the hospital. It matches my red shoes."

"Is your mom okay?"
the neighbors ask. "We saw
the ambulance take her away.
She smiled at us, waved
like she was off for a cruise.
She looked so cute in her red shoes."

In intensive care she asks,
"What did they do with my red shoes?
Lucy, look in that cabinet
and under the bed.
They were in a bag with my clothes.
I don't want to lose my red shoes."

Mom, I'd like to take you for a walk
in your red shoes. We could stroll
down Piedmont Avenue,
but you have something better to do.
You're already dancing
beyond the moon, in your red shoes.

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Christmas Eve at the Cemetery

A California winter day: clear and sunny,
little wind to stir the grass at Mountain View
in late afternoon. Never having been here
before in December, I am surprised
by the poinsettias and Christmas trees
with red, green, gold, and blue ornaments
adorning the graves. I've brought six roses
for you—three pink, three red—in a bouquet
with small white and lavender blossoms
and some sprigs of pine. If you don't like them,
it's okay, but I think you do, although
if you could I know you'd scold me for paying
ten dollars for flowers. All day I've been
wondering how I'll get through Christmas
without you to complain about your gifts.
"I don't need no more mugs or vases,"
I hear you say, ogling Aunt Ethel's presents,
which you always liked better than your own.
I suppose I'll deal with it the same way
I deal with the phone—thinking of you
each time it rings. You called me constantly:
"Now I'm going to do laundry," "Had tuna
for lunch," "Leaving for bingo. Wish me luck.
Don't know nothing new." I was always bored
and ready to hang up. Now absence
is worse than annoyance. I am alone,
standing in the long shadow of a pine,
talking to the stillness. "The laundry's done,
but I have gifts to wrap, so I really must go."

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DEAN ALBARELLI

Tacit

Because just last night I dreamt
the dream of our only certainty,
and, for what dreams are worth,
the dream was of you,
I want now to say the thing.
Because some morning I might wake
from that dream, or from another,
a back-in-school anxiety dream, say,
or a laugh-aloud-in-my-sleep-
with-the-logic-later-lost dream,
a wet dream even,
and find your body cold;
because I might, because it's possible,
I must say it.
Because some young fool
and his car at an intersection.
Because the plane in which you fly
home to visit your aging parents,
the careless and fallible pilot.
Because your sleek and daring
dives from the oil-drum raft each summer.
Because even the life you carry
within you now.

Or because you'll always safely
negotiate the maniac traffic, return
from every visit to your family
half a continent away, surface
from each dive with your familiar
sculpted skull still whole, each ripple
of vertebrae correctly aligned, shrieking
a wet open breath maybe
tossing our child at the sky;
because even then, for twenty years

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and twenty years more, gracing
into a safe and complacent old age,
it might not be said;
our moments when they come
perhaps even simultaneous,
the way we predicted in our teens,
but the thing still left unsaid.
Because of this, too, I would say it.

And because I still have not
forgotten the rolling and crunching
of the car you called "our economy coffin,"
the papers and coins
books and coffee tumbling
at our heads and across the roof,
the Iowa landscape cartwheeling out there;
because I don't doubt the moment
might be as quick and casual as an overlooked
stop sign on a Monday morning drive to work;
because for all I've held your hand and tried
to help it clutch the ineffable what
that lingers somewhere just short
of tongue and teeth, even so,
the thing has not been said.
And because even if we lived
forever it would want to be said.
And because, since we won't,
it especially wants saying.
Because of all this there is an itching,
gnawing, seizure-dizzy urge
to say the thing,
the thing I know you understand though
I've always left it unsaid,
the thing I believe you, too,
would say if you could,
the thing I have always wanted to say,
the thing I'll never manage to say,
oh how it wants to be said, I want
to say the thing the thing my love
I want to *say* it

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JEFFREY HARRISON

White Spaces

In memory of Bert M-P. Leefmans (1918-1980)

. . . hovering at the edges, elusive, he inhabits
spaces I would rather not clutter with words.

Even so, your words brought him back to me
and helped me find my own, remembering
that first day, when he lectured on Baudelaire
to five of us and a lot of empty seats,
speaking methodically, head in a cloud
of cigarette smoke, his frail hunched body
shuffling back and forth through a dust of ash.

He was not a romantic figure. More like
cut glass, chiseled, thin, emaciated, bent.

Soon we were meeting in his apartment
on Morningside, that street whose curving sweep
led us back to the turn of the century.
We pored over poems by Mallarmé,
surrounded by dozing snakes in glass cases
(he kept the mice to feed them in the kitchen).
He had a languid quality, like those snakes

—and something underneath, something like
the tautness of wire cutting down to truth—

working his way slowly through a poem
with a submerged urgency, examining
each word, while keeping all of them in view,
intent on any signalings between them.
"What matters is the relationship between

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the words," he'd say, "and the spaces around them."
They wavered and swerved under our gaze,

. . . shrugging and moving away, always on the move—
he wouldn't or couldn't stay with his persona.

but as he spoke their oscillation slowed,
until the whole poem seemed to crystallize,
to hover free and luminous above the page.
But poetry was also bound to life
by words—he wanted us to see that, too—
a notion out of fashion among his colleagues,
who treated him as though his time had passed.

He knew about power and didn't want it.
He tore up almost everything he wrote.

I can almost hear him saying it's hopeless,
this effort to put him into words—both mine
and yours, who wish to go unnamed.
Your letter about him put me to shame.
You who knew him so much better than I did
saw the futility, though you went on
for three typed pages at the speed of passion:

He knew about beauty but wasn't possessive about it.
He knew about letting go of what he wanted.

One day when I revealed to him my dream
of writing "a whole new kind of poetry,"
he scolded me for "taking the wrong approach.
Just write the poems that come naturally.
Whether or not they're new is unimportant.
They have to come from you. Remember that."
I did, years later, but not in time to thank him.

. . . knowledge carried lightly, that nonchalance he kept
to the very end, when his heart was failing him.

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I was too young and busy with my own life
even to notice he was sick, to be alarmed
by the cough that came from deep within his chest.
But one day my last semester, entering campus,
I saw the university's pale blue flag
at half-mast and instinctively changed course—
past Rodin's sullen *Thinker*, green with age,

An unconvinced survivor of his own life.
Le prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie.

into Philosophy, and up to his office door,
where a note explained he'd died the night before. . . .
Gone now, known too briefly and too long ago
for me to bring him back in a poem,
though I'd like to think that what he was
and what he gave me hover at the edges
of these lines, in the white spaces around them

. . . always asking what can be found in words
and what forever lies beyond them.

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JAYANTA MAHAPATRA

Dust

It's dust, colouring those secret horizons
of the bone day after day,
true prophet of life's sunset.
A blood-red silence flows into my eyes.

It's absurd to be afraid.
Of the anonymous rush of redness,
and the sudden understanding
that this blindness exists just here, and now—

the blindness of turning away
from the all-knowing horizon, heavy
with the triumph of memory, when
the heart is trapped in a clutch of light.

But what astonishes me most
is that I know dust is my hidden child,
in waking and in sleep,
a lonely idol whom only faith can shield;
as the softness of meteors of ancient spirits
comes sifting down through the blindfold of my fears.

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JOHN HALES

Hiking In, and Hiking Out

One of the assumptions we talked about the most and examined the least held that nature was good for troubled kids, and that's why we'd brought this assortment of high school students to spend a week in the canyons of the Escalante wilderness. I was teaching in a program for at-risk students, and each spring we'd scrounge backpacks and sleeping bags, pack ourselves into an assortment of student and teacher cars, and drive into the southern Utah desert for reasons we believed were more profound than merely recreational. Our hope for these students was that contact with what in the mid-seventies we naively called "pure nature," in combination with distance from the traumas and temptations of home and neighborhood, would prompt them to reconsider some of the bad decisions they were making. Most of us genuinely believed that nature—especially wild nature, untainted by the appropriation and waste that define human use—had that kind of power to heal and transform. Most of us thought it was all in the approach: take nature on its own terms, open yourself up to what wilderness could teach you, and something good would certainly happen.

I remember that it rained during most of the drive south, making us worry about the thirty miles of dirt road we'd have to cover to reach the Coyote Canyon trailhead. We stopped for lunch at a cafe in Escalante, the small town that marked the end of the paved road, ran splashing from our cars through the rain, and rushed through the door into what was clearly a cafe for the locals, not for tourists.

I'd been working summers as a surveyor for a few years by then, living in small southern Utah towns like this one, so I understood the difference. Most of the customers who looked us over were men. Some of them were regulars, the usual gathering of farmers and ranchers who met over coffee to talk feed prices, rainfall, politics. The rest had been driven by the rain from their work in

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the mountains and canyons to a place dry and warm and not so lonely: contract loggers, cowboys, post cutters, men who entertained even fewer illusions about the beneficence of nature than surveyors did.

These were men who would eagerly leave their work under the sublime wide-open skies of southern Utah to become miners and welders and pipe fitters the moment work commenced on the coal-fired power plant proposed for construction on a nearby mesa. During the six years since the project had been announced, it had become a lightning rod for every possible land-use faction—environmentalists objected to the inevitable degradation of air and water, tourists such as ourselves wanted the scenery to remain pristine, and the locals needed the work—and its future was being decided in courtrooms and legislative chambers even as we walked through that cafe door.

Two years earlier, during my first summer surveying for the Bureau of Land Management, my crew had worked not far from Escalante, reestablishing the boundaries of a square-mile school section that straddled the Wasatch Front just west of Koosharem, Utah (early land-use legislation set aside four of the thirty-six sections in each township for the support of public education; the State of Utah apparently had some use in mind for this particular acreage, hence our survey). Each morning we left our motel rooms in Richfield and drove east on State 24, the highway that conducted tourists to the recently constructed playground of Lake Powell. After a few miles crowded bumper-to-bumper with swaying motor homes and trailered houseboats, we'd turn south towards work.

On our first day, we'd left transits behind and did what we called "recon." Wise surveyors generally spent a day finding out what's what on a new job: the general lay of the land, the condition of the roads we'd travel, the gates we'd need keys for, the accuracy of the USGS maps we'd consult, the trustworthiness of the survey markers we'd be starting from. On the Koosharem job, we ran into trouble right away. The only road into the north end of the section started out pretty well, meandering easily up the broad floor of a wash. Although the wash was watered this particular morning by a narrow trickle of a stream, scattered remnants of tree trunks and boulders the size of kitchen stoves

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reminded us that a good rainstorm would flood the wash deeper than our truck's roof. After less than a mile, the road degenerated into two ruts that twisted out of the wash and onto a steep ridgeline. Our four-wheel drive whining in compound low, we climbed steadily towards Koosharem Peak, negotiated a dozen tight switchbacks, then leveled off on a sloping bench of aspen, spruce, and doug fir.

This was the first week in June, early spring at this altitude; we crossed several small creeks and plowed our way through a series of foot-deep snowdrifts, stopping finally in a sunlit opening that upon inspection turned out to be more bog than meadow. The tracks disappeared beneath the dark surface of standing water broken only by the skinny shoots of new grass, reappearing on more solid ground a hundred feet away. Come back in August, the landscape seemed to say.

Jerry walked around looking things over and thinking. We needed this road; parking our truck here would mean a lot of hiking, adding three or four more daily miles to what was going to be a couple of weeks of long days, carrying everything we needed—chain saw, transit, lath, water—to the beginning point; later, when we'd be running the section's northern boundary, this long hike would leave us only a couple of hours of daylight to do our work. It was clear, however, that there was no way we'd get through the swamp, even with four-wheel drive.

So we raised a dam and dug a canal. Without benefit of civil engineering expertise or environmental impact statement, and without even checking the land status map to determine whether we might be doing Bureau of Reclamation work on private land, we located the source of the water, a small spring that looked like it wouldn't last through July. We spent an hour digging a narrow trench and mounding a dam of mud and sod a foot high, diverting the water away from the road, forcing it to find another path to the Sevier River. When we returned a week later—we had modified our schedule to attend to the south boundary of the school section first, approachable by way of a road requiring only the usual four-wheel drive—we were happy to find that our reclamation project had been successful. The meadow was still pretty wet, but considerably more solid than it had been, and with enough speed and momentum, tires spinning just enough but not too much, and some elbows-flailing lock-to-lock steering,

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Jerry managed to blast through the meadow without once bogging down.

During that second week I was almost killed by lightning. We were running the section's northern boundary, which crossed a ridge just below the 11,000-foot summit of Koosharem Peak. I lined in a flag on the crest of the ridge, pounded it in according to Jerry's instructions over the radio, then watched Jerry and the front chain man measure a base line from which to triangulate the distance, preparing for the hike up the ridge to join me for the next leg into a broad high basin that presumably held the northwest section corner.

With nothing to do but wait, I passed the time watching a storm front darken and spread, filling the eastern sky as it blew itself in our direction. Jerry had also seen the storm, but wasn't quite ready to call it quits—he didn't think the storm looked serious, and with all that hiking just to get to the job, he wanted to make the most of the time we had on line—so he radioed me to find shelter while they did the same. I scouted up and down the austere ridgeline, finally locating a rock overhang several feet deep that offered no protection from the wind, but promised to keep most of me dry when the rain hit.

It was the only time I've seen Jerry misread the weather. As the storm moved closer and made its strength known, Jerry radioed a change of plans, explaining through the radio's crackling static that we'd better plan on getting the hell out of there, but that I'd best stay where I was until this first wave passed through. He was thinking of the swampy meadow we barely made it through each day, and what a good rainstorm would do to our meager reclamation project, and he was thinking about the wash we'd have to drive through; but he was also thinking that I'd be an excellent candidate for a lightning strike if I started down the slope right then to join them for the hike to the truck. So I hunched in my shallow cave and watched lightning strike the slope below me, each jagged bolt hitting closer than the one before.

Other than my fear, what I remember most is that the lightning strikes actually raised dust. The storm front was dry, so loaded with electricity that it couldn't hold much water, and the mountains had gone a couple of weeks without any rain to speak of, so the bolts hit dry earth, literally shaking the ground and raising

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small explosions of dust and dirt, smoky mushrooms that blew away quickly in the wind. For a few minutes I was sure the lightning would climb the ridge and find me out; the crash of thunder grew louder and louder, the flash and explosion right on top of each other, right on top of me; the electricity was a tangible presence, buzzing steadily between the echoing explosions, thickening the air with ozone and stiffening the hair on my arms. I pulled myself deeper into the overhang, knowing that being cooked in my oven-sized shelter was a real possibility. It was one of the few times in my life I understood that nature could kill me.

At almost the last moment, the line of lightning strikes angled away to the north, finally passing over the ridge and into the basin where we'd planned to extend our line that afternoon, and I relaxed a little, my heart slowing, the buzz in my ears fading. Jerry came on the radio, the clearer reception communicating a little of his true concern under his banter: predictably, he first asked whether the lightning had scorched that ponytail of mine. Then he told me that if I was still alive, it was time to run for it. Behind the dry overcharged front the storm looked like a lot of rain, so as soon as it was safe for me to hightail it down the mountain, I did. Slinging the equipment over our shoulders, we ran through an obstacle course of rock and sagebrush to the truck, then drove as fast as Jerry's skills would take us, slewing through the meadow minutes before the rain hit in earnest, making it through the wash just before it flooded.

"Pie and coffee," Jerry said as we turned north on the paved road, a code like "recon" that implied something slightly euphemistic. It meant that we were doing something we hardly ever did, calling it quits early for the day. We drove up the highway through the cafeless town of Koosharem, turning west onto 24, the highway that sped ski boats to Lake Powell.

We drove past the first cafes we saw because they were the places tourists went. They weren't exactly national chains, but they were too well lit by neon and too thoroughly heralded by billboards. We finally stopped at a small cafe in Sigurd, a tiny community just far enough south of Salina to be spared the white dust that filters down like fine snow from the gypsum mine that provided employment in this otherwise depressed corner of southern Utah. It was dark, inexpensive, and there were the regulars, local farmers and ranchers having their afternoon

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coffee, and a few others, men who like us had been driven by the elements into a place that felt safe and communal. They watched us as we came inside, nodded, and then went back to their quiet conversations, to their pie and coffee.

I knew even before I opened the door and herded my students into the Escalante cafe, before I saw the glares and felt the hostility, that we didn't belong, weren't welcome. It didn't help that our cars were plastered with bumper stickers that praised the Sierra Club and condemned the interests that would build mines and power plants in the coal-rich plateaus that surrounded this poor desert town, projects that offered employment beyond the usual for the cash-starved great-grandchildren of Mormon pioneers: cutting cedar posts, working seasonally for government agencies, hauling hay during the brief growing season. We were in the wrong place at the wrong time, and once again I was confused about my place, about where I belonged.

Of course I was with my students. I felt the fierce protective connection that I recognized a few years later when I had children of my own: like any good parent, I was upset that anyone would look at these kids in a way that could hurt them. But I recognized the glares, and I couldn't lie to myself about the depth of experience that lay behind them, the enormity of the gap that separated them from us, the distance that separated me from the person I'd been two summers before, a person who had learned something important in that school section above Koosharem.

Although I'd been happy to have survived the lightning and found a dry safe place, and was looking forward to the warmth of coffee and the domestic comfort of apple pie, I hadn't felt entirely at home that afternoon in the Sigurd cafe. I'd only been surveying for a month or so; Jerry reminded me daily that my long hair was going to get me beat up in one of the small-town bars and cafes where we spent most summer evenings (among the more coherent graffiti I'd read in men's rooms throughout southern Utah was "kill all hippies and niggers"), just as he reminded me that my questions were stupid and my prospects as a surveyor doubtful. It wasn't until much later that summer—when I'd finally achieved some measurable insight into both the theory and practice of running line—that Jerry had let me know I'd make it through the

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summer and perhaps even into the next, crediting less the quality of my work than the effectiveness of his instruction.

That next summer—my second working for the BLM—we'd surveyed a township on the Kaiparowitz Plateau, a roadless mile-high mesa that served the various needs of humanity: in addition to offering up coal for the future production of electricity, the Kaiparowitz provided the snowmelt for Coyote Creek, the tributary of the Escalante River that carved the canyon into which I'd eventually march my students. That summer I came to feel more at home in those places, the bars and cafes which offered community only to those who understand that nature is not necessarily your friend.

Although this process of acculturation, of finding myself more or less comfortable in the redneck cafes of southern Utah, was gradual, it was punctuated forever by one August day in particular, probably the worst day of my surveying career. It had been unbearably hot; we'd gotten used to temperatures in the high 90s, but this day was nearer 115, the third day of a heat wave that had left us wilted and exhausted. The helicopter struggled in the heat and altitude to take us where we needed to go: the heat drained the air of the density the rotor blades needed to beat effectively against, and the helicopter's temperature gauge trembled near the boundary where the green gives way to red. Even the starter motor hesitated, whining more annoyingly than usual as it cranked over the engine to take us to the ten hours of difficult work we'd planned.

That day I actually walked a mile at high noon to find shade. We were running line across a broad shale flat; the smooth light-gray surface reflected sunlight as effectively as a tanning mirror, and poured heat through the soles of our work boots. The dry landscape practically shouted sterility: there were no junipers, no pinion pines, not even the occasional clump of demoralized salt grass or hostile cactus. And there was literally no relief to this landscape, no rock behind which you could find a little shade.

We'd just planted our final corner marker, our shovels cutting slowly through the brittle layers of shale. Because this landscape was so open and unobstructed, and because we'd wanted to get as much done as possible in the relative cool of the morning, we'd worked fast and hard, finishing the mile we'd assigned ourselves an hour and a half before the helicopter was scheduled to pick us

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up and carry us to another line on the other side of the township, so we waited, some of us more comfortably than others. One of the many things I envied in Jerry—something I'd noticed about the other party chiefs, most of them like Jerry natives of the same southern Utah landscape we surveyed—was his ability to create shade. He wore only a baseball hat, yet he was able to gather himself into its shadow as he squatted to enter numbers and notes in his yellow fieldbook, somehow shaded by that meager brim so that only the tip of his nose and the bend of his knees caught the direct scorching rays of the sun. The way he was able to create shade out of nothing seemed to go against the laws of physics I knew anything about, and I knew that no matter how I contorted myself, no matter what sombrero of a hat I wore, I'd still remain a city boy, exposed as a turkey on a spit. I was usually stoic at times like this, but it was 115 degrees and I was willing to do anything to get the sun off my back, even for a few minutes.

I announced that I couldn't stand it—I needed shade. I looked towards the only relief I could see, a wash that paralleled our line a half mile away, and I walked in that direction, telling myself that my movement at least stirred up the air around me as I walked, cooling me a little even as it encouraged more fluid loss and hastened the inevitability of heat exhaustion. I wasn't disappointed completely—there was no shading overhang, but I found a narrow side wash just about my size. After checking for snakes and scorpions, I squeezed myself between the ravine's crumbling shale walls and luxuriated in what at least was not direct sun. I lay there curled waiting for the whap-whap-whap of the helicopter's rotor blades, fantasizing about the rotor wash the helicopter brought with it as it landed. However noisy and stinging with grit and stinking of exhaust and hot oil, it was nevertheless *wind*, moving air, the only thing we had to look forward to on a day like this.

But that isn't what I heard. What I heard was Jerry's voice on my radio telling me that the helicopter wasn't coming. The pilot had shut it down while he waited for the other crew to finish its work, and now the engine wouldn't start. It had succumbed to that most banal of all infirmities, a dead battery, the same thing that eventually had brought low every marginal car of my high school years, its solenoid making the same impotent clicking noise. We'll have to hike out, Jerry said.

Hiking out, we all well knew, meant at least seven miles to the

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nearest road, a graveled two-lane that ran alongside a geological feature known as the Coxcomb, a high straight sandstone fin uplifted to the nearly vertical by the same forces that had raised the flatter strata of the Kaiparowitz Plateau. The other crew had parked a truck there; they saved time each day by meeting the helicopter on the Coxcomb road after our crew had been flown directly from Glen Canyon City. We were spared that drive every morning because our township was closer by air, which meant that we had an easier commute but a longer workday. Today, it meant that although both crews would have to hike out, ours would be by far the longer hike.

Actually, were it not for the fact that we were nearly out of water, carrying our surveying gear, and doing it all in the direct blast of a 115-degree sun, it was an interesting hike, the scenery spectacular once we'd escaped the shale flat, the kind of terrain I'd have hiked through happily in my previous life as a backpacker and climber, a tourist who'd periodically wrapped himself in the red rock and blue sky of the southern Utah landscape. In that other life, the desert was a wonderful place, alternately healing and energizing, and seven miles was nothing if it meant putting some distance between you and civilization. But this was work, *hard* work. Our hike took us past the stranded helicopter, where we both profaned at and commiserated with the pilot. After making the inevitable offer to push-start the helicopter by shoving it off the cliff, we continued our forced march, our demoralized ranks now including the pilot, who looked wistfully over his shoulder at his lawn chair abandoned in the shade of a large pinion pine. Now you get to see how the other half lives, Jerry said to him as we took on the remaining miles.

Our route led us across the gradually swelling rise of a high plateau, then around the head of a wash that drained deeply to the east, eventually joining the Escalante River near Coyote Canyon. We had to make the decision hikers in the desert always have to make: is it better to walk around the various rises and fallings of topography, trading altitude for miles, across for up-and-down? I'd spent my life before I became a surveyor preferring to maintain altitude, walking longer distances to keep the height I'd attained, but I was hiking with surveyors now, and although we angled south a little to avoid the biggest ledges, we otherwise climbed straight up the ridges and plunged into and

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out of the washes and canyons as if we were still running line, losing and then reclimbing thousands of vertical feet. I focused on the inch or two of water that sloshed in my canteen, resolving to drink it only when the truck was in sight.

Our way was easy to see: the Coxcomb dominated the view to the west, a sharp spine of crags and blades thrust dramatically along a straight line for twenty miles in a northerly direction, aligned as if it had been surveyed by someone who had a pretty good idea of where north ran, but hadn't based his bearing on a precise observation of Polaris. We were approaching the Coxcomb from its less precipitous eastern side, climbing a long steep slope dotted with small junipers and clumps of desert grass. This would be a difficult climb under any circumstances, and we'd been hiking for hours now without rest, the temperature reaching its midafternoon peak, the sun hitting us square in the face as we raised our eyes to the jagged skyline of the Coxcomb. We were finally letting our lousy attitudes surface, bitching and moaning, shifting our packs and tripods from the painful ruts they'd worn in our backs, wringing our shirts of sweat as we neared the conclusion of all that unforeseen and unwelcome work.

Reaching the crest, we spotted the Travelall parked five hundred feet below us, and by scouting along the spine we were able to find a rock chimney we could squeeze into and down, making our way through the upthrust sandstone reef and slowly down the cliff band of the nearly vertical west side. Trading breathlessness now for precariousness, we handed our tripods, packs and belts to each other, climbing carefully from ledge to ledge, gouging ourselves on sharp outcrops and sliding painfully on our stomachs across the cheese-grater surface of decomposing sandstone faces, finally reaching the loose scree at the foot of the cliffs, where by alternately skidding and digging in the heels of our boots, we managed to ski our way down to the road, nicely graded so as to conduct tourists comfortably alongside the sublimity of the Coxcomb to the apparently photogenic rock formations of Kodachrome Basin State Park. We finally arrived at the truck to find that there was no water there either, the crew chief having neglected his duty this morning of all mornings.

We raced to the nearest bar along the nearest highway. This was something we never did—on those days the weather made work impossible we'd go for actual pie and actual coffee, and we'd

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consume it in a respectable cafe, not a saloon. On normal days, beer drinking would commence after hours when, making it back to our motels or trailers, we'd pull the tabs even before our boots came off. Then, we'd walk to the nearest bar. We understood what a row of BLM trucks parked outside a tavern looked like to the average taxpayer. The few surveyors who drank on the job did it circumspectly, submerging a six-pack beneath motel-machine ice in the five-gallon coolers we carried in each truck, later burying the evidence at the bottom of the deep efficient holes we'd learned to dig.

But we were angry, depressed and *really thirsty*, and this was not a pie-and-coffee kind of day: we needed a bar. After a skidding race down the Coxcomb road, we parked our truck in front of the first beer-serving establishment we could find, a dilapidated bar on Highway 89 that in more elegant terrain would be termed a "roadhouse" but here was only a windowless tin-roofed cinder-block cube with an ancient swamp cooler that screamed its scant comfort into our faces as we pulled ourselves around a table and inhaled as many beers as we could get down. I wasn't much of a beer drinker—another of the many inclinations that marked me as somebody who didn't quite fit in—and I alternated swigs from my beer bottle with gulps from a glass of the bar's alkaline tap water, barely cooled by a few anemic ice cubes.

I'm trying to remember now what we looked like as if it could help explain what happened next. We were soaked and rancid with the sweat we'd poured through a long morning of hard work and a longer afternoon of unanticipated walking, hotter even for the half-hour we'd spent crammed on top of each other in the nonair-conditioned Travelall, after all those hours hiking nonrecreationally across the desert. We were burned black by our weeks in the sun, our workshirts and Levi's grimy with the gray of the shale flat and the sand that filled our work boots and pants as we slid down the steep west side of the Coxcomb. We were just beginning to stop being pissed off at the whole mess, the breaking down of the helicopter, the unnecessary hiking, the lack of water at the truck.

We were just beginning the process of rehydration and forgiveness, our cells just commencing to reconstitute themselves with water and alcohol, starting to feel a little normal, whatever that was, when three tourists, two men and a woman, walked into the

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bar to ask directions and perhaps take a break from the heat of their own driving. They were my age, college students, wearing shorts, tucked-in T-shirts, their long hair kept in check by bandannas in a variety of colors and arrangements: rolled into a headband, tied into a cap, the woman's holding her hair back in a kind of babushka.

We had the advantage on them in every way. They blinked as they entered the dark of the bar, looking around them as their eyes adjusted, not knowing whom to ask for the directions they needed or where to sit for refreshment they might want, and so we had a chance to look them over and make our judgments, which is exactly what we did, taking advantage as if they were the enemy of their momentary blindness and our clear view. We stopped talking and turned in their direction, taking in their Vibram-soled hiking boots, their baggy shorts, the beads that hung around their necks, their long hair.

I'm still trying to figure out exactly how I was able to hate them so entirely, so purely. I was more *them* than I was *us*; I had in common with them their age, their long hair, and eight months out of the year, their reason for being in the desert. The months I surveyed—who knows who, or what, I was? I was dressed like Jerry, like the Reynolds brothers, the men who had grown up in the desert and become surveyors, men whose great-grandparents had been Mormon pioneers exiled to this hell of chaotic red canyons and dry springs. A century of accumulated desert wisdom enabled Jerry and the others to understand nature as it really was: an enemy that must be defeated in order for the community to survive. Their ancestry, their upbringing, led them directly to this most logical of professions, surveying, enlisting themselves as the sappers who lay out the lines, preparing the way so that the invasion can be carried out efficiently, with as few casualties as possible.

In spite of our similar clothing, however, these sons of southern Utah continued to regard me with a little suspicion. Among the nicknames I carried with me the first few summers were "Ponytail" and "McGovern." Although I was feeling more at home in the small towns where we rented rooms or parked our bunk trailers, I was continually aware of the cultural and geographical distance that defined the way I spent my nonsurveying months—Monday through Friday in school, weekends backpacking and cross-country skiing—and the way I earned my tuition money each summer.

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Any other day I might have been torn, not quite knowing whether I stood with the backpackers in their shorts and vacation days, or sat with the men I worked with daily. On another day, I might have offered a friendly word or helped with directions, not worrying that I was marking myself as something alien to the purposes of the Bureau of Land Management, something Jerry and the others already knew. But that day I had earned, as we used to say, my per diem. I'd walked a half-mile each way just for the gift of a half-hour's shelter from the sun, and then dragged myself on a waterless shadeless unplanned-for seven-mile forced march to a truck that had no water, and I'd joined the ranks of survivors, suffered and prevailed in something that felt just a little more serious—and hence more real—than tourism. At that moment, I thought I finally knew what nature was, what those rocks and plateaus and geological formations actually were once you peeled fancy names like "The Coxcomb" and "Kodachrome Basin" and "Coyote Canyon" away from them, names that only existed on the map, weren't imbedded in the actual topography the way trees, cliffs, and survey markers were.

That afternoon in that nameless bar along Highway 89 there was not a single molecule of me that was confused. I knew whose side I was on. I not only couldn't understand why anybody in his right mind would come out into all this heat and dust and unshaded sun for any reason other than to do battle; I held these people in contempt for their stupidity, for their incomprehensible wrongness concerning nature. Whatever good feelings we'd begun to conjure up vaporized the second they walked through the door, and we all glared at them, a kind of electrically palpable hostility it was clear they felt, a threat of insults and perhaps even violence: my mind played a quick preview of the inevitable escalation, the pushing and the fists, the kind of unfair one-sided fight I'd observed and thus far escaped in other barrooms throughout southern Utah, this time not a bit unsure whose side I'd take.

One of them mumbled a question about the Paria Canyon Wilderness ranger station, where they hoped to find the trailhead for the Whitehouse Trail. As we watched them look around nervously, fish thrown upon a dry unfriendly shore, the bartender said *a few miles down the road*, and they awkwardly turned and escaped into the bare sunshine of late afternoon, any thoughts of having a quick beer evaporating in the dry anger of the room.

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It would be too simple to say I identified with the regulars in the Escalante cafe, that day a year later when I'd followed my students through the door for lunch, taking a break on our journey to Coyote Canyon in search of spiritual regeneration. To some extent, of course, I did, but it had been almost a year since I'd worked as a surveyor, and the thick angry silence disoriented me. My students handled the hostility a lot better than I did, their expressions communicating the combination of boredom and disdain they practiced daily. They were used to glares and judgments, understood that offending people was not only the price they paid for being teenagers, but a kind of affirmation of the choices they'd made. This is not to say that their feelings were immune to hurt; it's just that they'd been hurt by the best, by those they trusted and loved. A bunch of farmers in a small Utah town—in contrast to family and friends—were pretty easy to dismiss.

My students had another advantage: they were city kids. Our high school drew from a district that cut through the range of social classes that stratified Salt Lake City; a few of our students were the children of doctors and professors, a few more had been fed their entire lives by food stamps and welfare checks, and the rest were from families who lived from paycheck to paycheck. They had in common—in addition to their being in some kind of trouble, the only qualification a kid needed to transfer into our program—their urbanity, their sophistication in the ways of civilized life. They had no clue about the way the people of Escalante lived, what they valued, how they survived. More importantly, they didn't *want* to know. They'd learned that however crummy their own neighborhoods, cites were the future, the location of power and dominance, the place where decisions about electric plants and wilderness areas were ultimately made.

They understood that there was the city, and there was the landscape outside the city, the mountains and deserts that existed in order that city folks could charge their spiritual batteries when convenient. That people actually lived in this landscape was a fact too complicated to consider, so they didn't. Instead, they sat at the various unoccupied tables, ordered their hamburgers, alternately returned and ignored the hostility that permeated the room as they talked about what was important to them, enclosing themselves in the small communities of their booths and tables,

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fortified outposts in a dangerous landscape. Later, walking to our cars, someone said "redneck assholes," and most of us murmured agreement, the words simultaneously naming and dismissing the whole experience.

I kept quiet. The summer before, when my rehydration had been interrupted by something equally urban and recreational, there had been something deep and sincere in the hatred I'd felt for the three people who stopped on their way to the Whitehouse Trail. In contrast, what I felt in the Escalante cafe was so complex as to be unidentifiable. Other than my feeling protective and a little scared—I loved these kids, felt responsible for their safety, and I knew firsthand the accumulation of anger warehoused behind those stares, understood that the potential for danger was more real than they knew—I felt justly accused of having done something wrong, something serious.

What I mostly felt was mistaken, that I'd not only betrayed loyalty—I felt an unforeseen sense of connection with these particular redneck assholes—but knowledge. I felt for a moment that I had denied what I knew to be true, that I was guilty of some kind of profound dishonesty. Working in a particular landscape enables you to understand things about the terrain, the trees and grasses, the sharp unforgiving rocks and the rare stingy springs, things you will never learn as a tourist. You learn, for example, that although you can carve your lines into just about any forest or rock formation that might present itself, the landscape always prevails. It snaps back. It can kill you in any number of ways: snakebite, rockslide, lightning, dehydration. You set up your transit beneath a crumbling rock face you know could at any moment collapse on top of you; you look around at the house-sized remnants of the most recent catastrophe, and you know there will be no warning this time either. Or the tree you're cutting down to clear line will fall the wrong way, swung by a connection with a neighboring tree even the most experienced axeman wouldn't have seen, pivoting in a direction that catches you dead center. When you spend fifty- or sixty-hour work-weeks—or a lifetime of difficult unshaded work—under it, that beautiful southern Utah sun can be seen for what it is: nothing less than your enemy, draining you of the water necessary for life, cutting into the tender layers of your flesh to burn you into something that almost glows in the welcome darkness of nightfall.

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You learn that in wetter and cooler seasons, other forces take their turn: the random lightning strike, the wall of water that crushes you beneath the weight of rain that fell on a mesa thirty miles away. Coming or going, nature is something other than your friend.

What about regeneration, then? Did I really believe what we told our students concerning the purpose of our yearly expeditions, bringing their troubled souls into contact with nature, pure and uncontaminated? By this time I'd read Emerson, so I understood the theory, and Muir, who had elaborated upon the application, telling me, for example, that the thunderstorm is something to be known, not feared, that the best way to understand the essentially loving nature of lightning is to place yourself in the top branches of the tallest tree you can find. And I'd spent so much time climbing and backpacking in the deserts and mountains of Utah and Wyoming that I should have understood the ways I'd been personally improved, *re-created*. I'd also seen the way experiences in nature touched my students, prompting various degrees of transformation in character and outlook: I'd observed a clearer depth to one kid's glance, a more measured response to the horrors another student faced daily. I'd even read studies done on teenagers who'd survived those expensive wilderness experience programs, complete with numbers proving that the majority of their graduates were measurably improved by the time they'd spent in nature: better grades, better attitudes, better prospects.

Nevertheless, beyond what seems to *work*, beyond the anger of southern Utah ranchers, the relative desirability of wilderness areas or coal-fired power plants, the longer attention span of a particular student—beyond the specific individuals and issues that hover around the periphery of the most important questions—you might believe exists the *truth* about nature. Having experienced both sides, having served both as wilderness guide for my students and as a huddled target for a line of lightning strikes, perhaps I should have understood what that truth might be.

Instead, what I understood was placelessness. I'd been pushed by far more information about nature than I could handle into a kind of paralysis, a loss of identity, a feeling of belonging nowhere, least of all in the landscape we planned to hike into, the

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canyons carved by water melted from the Kaiparowitz snowpack. I was learning too much in both lives, none of it adding up to the kind of wisdom that might have allowed me to understand and perhaps complicate the pure hatred I'd directed towards the three backpackers that hot afternoon the summer before.

Part of the problem involved my background: like my students, I was a city kid. Even though I'd spent a good part of my life in the out-of-doors, and had learned a lot of what James Fenimore Cooper called the "subtle crafts of the forest," until I began surveying, my frame of reference was essentially urban. My childhood had been spent on family vacations to national parks, pack trips into various wilderness areas in Utah and Wyoming, a week each summer at Scout camp, daily hikes into the mountains above my home. It was a great way to grow up, but looking back on those experiences from the perspective of a surveyor, they start looking superficial, my participation somehow lacking in sincerity.

Emerson pointed out the obvious: although my confusion was partly a problem of history and culture, it was mostly personal—nature "always wears the colors of the spirit." Basically, I didn't know where I stood because I didn't know who I was. This condition had long preceded my experience as a surveyor, but those eight years of watching my two lives speed in opposite directions accelerated my anxiety to the crisis point. Each summer when I'd return to surveying, with yet another academic year's worth of ever more sophisticated insights into the great scheme of things, Jerry would hold forth on the inverse relationship between the increase in my knowledge of things academic and recreational, and the corresponding decrease in my already meager inventory of common sense. He'd make the same joke each June: he'd loudly enroll me in Shovel 101, reviewing for me the techniques of hole-digging and assigning me a week's worth of homework. By the time I'd entered graduate school—and, based on Jerry's sense that I was at least learning the procedures of surveying, having advanced to the position of crew chief and transit operator—he was prescribing Remedial Shovel, so stupid had I become concerning the essential nature of my work and of the landscape we did it in.

Nevertheless, each township has four school sections, and Jerry helped me learn more from surveying them than he would ever know. It's true that in college I was mastering increasingly subtle

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and sophisticated ways to consider the relationship between human beings and the natural world, but I was learning a lot more each summer. I was not only learning to think like a surveyor, a world view that frightened me a little as I considered it from the perspective of a university classroom; I was learning to think like a native, like the locals who, when summer arrived, allowed me to approach their watering holes. The months I spent each year as a student and teacher reinforced something more intellectually complex but less substantial and profound, a view of the world constructed upon something less than a firm foundation. In this world, I knew a lot of things, but I'm embarrassed to say that I knew nothing that was true. Each winter I skated on the hard surface of intellectual inquiry, and I could execute some wonderful scholarly and pedagogical maneuvers, circling in tighter and tighter spins around the complex truths to be found in nature, thinking so hard about the mechanics of spiritual regeneration that it was finally reduced to a paradigm, a teaching strategy, not a way of actually living in your body, let alone in the landscape you occupy. I was learning a lot, but I didn't know a thing.

That's what finally troubles me the most. My hatred for those three backpackers was the closest I've ever come to knowing something deep in each of my tired bones, in my soul, in the basement of my actual identity. I knew it the way Emerson tells us you know the truth—it wasn't reason or science or cultural wisdom; I hadn't gleaned it from a book, or from a conversation around a cracker barrel or a seminar table. It was animal, it was instinctual, it was not complicated at all. That day the landscape had taught me its essence in a way that was profound and personal, and when those hikers walked into the dark of the bar, their eyes blinded by the late afternoon sun, I hadn't regained my wits sufficiently to start *thinking* about it, to begin questioning and contextualizing the experiences of the day. A year later, by the time I opened the door and followed my students into the Escalante cafe, I'd regained my wits, along with all the confusion and complexity that is the legacy of too much information, too much thinking, understanding less than ever what I needed to know about my place in the landscape into which we hiked.

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PATTIANN ROGERS

Almanac

When Jesus the Christ was born,
it was the anniversary of the day
the last living dinosaur crumpled,
fell to the ground like a giant
sequoia, died in its bones
and ceased.

On the day Jesus the Messiah
was born, the grand river-sea,
Rio Amazonas, nearly white, as usual,
with light-reflecting particles
of suspended clay, flowed along
steadily toward its confluence
with the Rio Negro.

The crater rocks lay
just as we see them tonight
on the moonlight side of the moon,
when the King of Kings first
came to be. But the Leonid shower
of two hundred thousand meteors
was traveling still centuries
from earth, and Krakatau loomed
serene, benign, without murder,
in the southern sea.

At the same hour the infant Jesus
of Nazareth first drew breath,
Great China went forth in imperial
parade and regalia, a wagon of bronze
chimes rolling and ringing like sun
on a river in full morning, and a lone

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zither, played in the countryside,
was tapped by the left finger
of the solitary musician, and so sounded
"the echo of an empty valley."

On the night of the day the Savior
was born, a mother Marie, her first infant
daughter stillborn, died alone in childbirth
in a dark stable on the other side
of another realm of another plane.

On the day of the first Christmas,
sea elephant cows lolled in fat harems
among snorting bulls guarding
their western sandy beaches, and cannibals
blessed and ate in the land of tinkerbirds,
pottos, bush pigs and drongos, and a caracal
on the desert carefully licked clean
the crevices of each of her bloody claws,
and unnamed winds ravaged the rock-
ice pinnacles of the Himalayas,

and the presentiment of illusory union
moves closer and moves farther away
and passes through from the center onward.

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STEPHEN C. BEHRENDT

Deer Season: U.S. 41

Four lanes from Green Bay to Milwaukee,
in November it's the corridor of death,
the route of ruined carcasses strapped to car roofs
or stretched across the fenders of old Ford trucks
or pitched in heaps in the beds of pickups.

Young bucks with antlers barely pronged
and unlucky ten- and twelve-pointers alike
share this ritual ride southward,
empty eyes wide into the wind of transit,
mouths drawn open, tongues lolling;
legal does too, hollowed out in the field
(the illegal lie hidden where they dropped
in woods, swamps, in fencerows where their soft thighs
tangled and fouled in rusting barbed wire).

We meet them all afternoon, a hundred at least to the hour,
so that we forget to count, cease almost to notice,
as if they were outsize hood ornaments, talismans
to grace and protect the heavy-shirted drivers
who angle through the gathering twilight
toward homes with firesides, children building snow-forts,
wives who look from windows toward the streets
in Muckwanego and New Berlin, West Allis and Oconomowoc
for signs their anxiety is done, their husbands whole.

A month from now these same cars and trucks
will ply the highway again, festooned
with greens, with Christmas trees fresh cut
and mounted on tops, fenders, truck-beds
as if to sweep away with arms of evergreen
the residue of death.

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Mrs. Sewell's Poems

I walk the basement aisles of library shelves,
mile after mile: records of lives
printed, shelved, forgotten:
names I do not recognize, volumes
slight or weighty, languishing in long rows
like bones in reliquaries, skulls on shelves
in catacombs, old cars rusting in Midwestern fields.

I open a slim volume, its leather cover
sloughing its dry brown skin in my palm:
poems from 1802 by an English woman
wholly vanished but for her last name:
chain-lined paper redolent of age and damp,
studded with apostrophes and the quaint tall *s*.

Here she recorded ordinary fancies and sorrows,
rhyming the death of birds or children, widowhood,
gifts given and received, made and consumed,
the consolation of friends, their deaths
as she watched her circle wither and shrink.

Did she profit, I wonder? Did any buy,
any read, any picture her as she was,
any recall in later years? Or did the copies lie
unopened, passed along at last, unwanted,
to the library that would have them?

Another volume stands misshelved,
far out of place, where none will find it
even if they try. The author long dead too,
her poems wander, lost, in this vast graveyard
where browsers scan the brief inscriptions
on these crumbling, crowded spines, then pass on,
unmoved, to other ashes, other dust.

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NINA BOGIN

Rue du Faubourg Poissonnière

Across the Paris evening, in high-heeled
purple boots and a midnight-blue skirt,

I followed your directions: go to the end
of the courtyard, climb the spiraled stairs.

You waited at the top. At last!
You thought I wouldn't come.

I hardly remembered what you looked like,
what you wore; but your voice

on the telephone was warm,
like a balm, like pine honey.

So I was sure. All evening,
side by side on the leather sofa,

we talked up a storm. And far
into the night, I laid my head

on your chest. Your eyes were
deep glints of brown.

I stayed that night, and the next
and the next: I never left.

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Night Train, Sweden

The train twisted through the Swedish night.
All around us, thick textures of twilight:

forests heavy with the afternoon's rain,
ribbon-glimpses of lakes,

the yellow blur of farmhouse lights.
All night we kept arriving,

like coming home
to the vast, welcoming summer

of someone else's childhood,
almost our own.

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F. D. REEVE

Voices

When I hear my lover singing, I sing, too.
The tune? Something I make up in my head.
Words come and go—wind, mood, mode—
listening and loving, I sing her what Henry said:
No one else got music like you do.

The sound of music tells us who is who—
a patterned mind, shapenotes in the dark,
rhythms (the thunder) pounding down the air . . .
By pairs we populate imaginary arks
and climb great mountains to paint a grander view.

Brash and raw like crows in morning rain,
Achilles' war cry and mad Ajax's lament
pierce my dry heart. When Virgil sings for Rome
(sings of arms and the man who founded a new race)
I think of Troy in ashes and of Dido left to burn.

Time lies on the dead as they sleep in each other's arms.
The celestial harmonies play on unheard.
Here is the day like a warm stone in my hand,
the earth going round and round on its carousel
as if, after life, the singing goes on and on.

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Three Fish

> The Apostles were so artfully made that you could take them for living men.
>
> —Gogol

The fish in Loo Fung Market lie on ice,
flat their fins and their rice-paper tails.
Like Madame Defarge at the scaffold, they cast their cold eyes
on each comer: Who bid you sail
from the sea into this frozen despair?

Crowned in blue anemones the carp
laughs with the ladies of its mind.
The mackerel plucks the seaweed like a harp,
and the sheepish mullet prays for its lost kind.
Death is a public pantomime,

last mockery of the carnival of noise.
Fish, friend, fool—dumb and deaf,
side by side by the price tags like buoys,
they wait for whatever action's left,
as if resurrection were coming next.

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DAVID DOOLEY

During the Rosary

The tall and rather sexy Dominican monk,
gaunt enough to be HIV-positive, chanted once again
"Our Lady, Queen of Carmel," when Bernie lifted his arm,
the better to scoot his torso upright, then brace himself
to maneuver his right leg so he could finally
drop it over the edge of the coffin and say,
"That's *Bernie*, Queen of Carmel, if you don't mind."
By then he'd clambered out of the coffin for good.
"Go on with the rosary," he said, "you'd be surprised
how much good it does. Weren't some of you praying just
now—
Bob and Joe, Dr. Cool back there, you handsome devil—
that I could be alive? Let me tell you, they listen
up there, and you Protestants are at a real disadvantage
because the Virgin is very influential. By the way,
Ralph and Len send you their best. They're not in heaven
proper, there's no smoking in heaven, so the smokers
have to go to a kind of celestial Betty Ford Clinic
until they're cured. Len has made several reorganizational
proposals; he's still in the process of getting adjusted to
heaven
and vice versa, I might add. Oh, David, I met a delightful
literary couple named Alfred and Arthur. They thought you'd
have heard of them. They said to keep on with your writing
but they were surprised by some of the language.
Your mother assured them you didn't learn it from her.
I suppose you all want to hear how I was murdered.
I'm truly sorry that Stanley had to find my body
in the flower shop, but they tell me that's an essential part
of his spiritual quest. It's true I interrupted a robbery—
there were two of them, as the police suspected, and when I
tried to run, they stabbed me. Five times in all.
Twice in the chest, three times in the back. I died right away.
I lay on my left side, which is why one of my hands is gray

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while the other is still brown. I suppose the morticians
did the best they could, but haven't these queens heard of
body makeup? I'm not angry at the men who killed me.
I wasn't when they were stabbing me, or afterward
when the unholy emotions were being purged.
They'd been high on drugs all night, in a spiritual blindness
worse than the fear and pain I felt when they stabbed me.
Don't shake your heads, it's true. When I leave here,
I'll be giving the police their descriptions, and I understand
they'll be caught and convicted and will finally
die by lethal injection. About their souls,
I'll intercede if asked, but they'll have to ask me themselves.
Se habla español in the Lord's kingdom, I feel right at home,
and the Mexicans and blond Argentines make the hunkiest
angels.
For my friends who are wondering about Edward,
he and I are together now, though some people in heaven
are still a little huffy about porno stars.
My pilgrimage to Medugorje helped get him in—
I'll throw that out to those who can take a hint.
I'd like to thank my friends the Carmelite nuns
who couldn't join us tonight but are serving God
in the convent. Do those girls ever know how to pray!
I have a message of hope for all homophobic politicians:
St. Luke can't wait to give you a lobotomy,
it's your only chance. If any of you doubt
that you're seeing what you think you're seeing,
come feel the wounds in my side. That line's
been used before, but you don't wear your best outfit
to the bar only once. When the rosary's over—
the non-Catholics back there could really use cue cards—
I want to embrace each one of you. On the third day
I'll ascend into heaven, which has been done before too,
but they want me back before I appear
on too many talk shows. Our Lady herself
sends a message of faith, love and peace.
The age of miracles is only beginning.

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The Crystal

As if the death he expected were a large
shimmering crystal between him and his visitor
or surrounding them and seeming to invite
awed tentative exploration. They'd said
for the first time "I love you," meaning goodbye,
a week ago. Today he could sit in a chair
though he needed oxygen. He spoke more distinctly.
Last night he'd sat on the patio with his parents
until the gnats bothered him. You've had a long trip
for such a short visit, he said. His visitor answered
that the morning was cool and the drive down to the ranch
quite pleasant. A just-weaned calf in a nearby field
kept uttering loud insistent moos. The visitor
laughed at the sound, but he did not. He seemed
to have no muscles for it, not even around the eyes.

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PATRICK WALSH

Missing Person

You rise during the commercial break to leave the living room.
It's behind you now, the blue and white flashes on the walls,
The coffee table where you left your drink, a cold tumbler
With popping ice. You think: something to eat would be nice.

But you never get there. The front door is open this August night
And, like the moths in their frenzy around the porch light,
You're drawn to have a look. Cool evening: its summered air,
Unfiltered through the mesh screen, stirs a nameless pang.
Outside, your field is fallow but the moon is ploughing its rows.
The crickets play—what would you call it—their busy signal.

Across the valley a luminous cone makes its way, turning into
A pair of glowing red eyes: old Moses McGovern
Comes down from the mountain. You hear an audience applaud—
Everything you want is at hand and your life is good, thank God.
And it's not like there's some need long-ignored, some plan
You never got around to fulfilling; it's all sitting in that room . . .

But the night has a way of subsuming all nights.
And what are dreams? And why can you just as easily see
Your house narrowing with distance as you walk alone
Through the silver-blue shadows of trees?

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BERT CARDULLO

Blood, Snow, and Tears

SINCE THE PASSING OF MY BELOVED FATHER SIX MONTHS AGO, together with the recent, untimely end (in a car accident) of my best student, the subject of death has been much on my mind: death as the end of earthly life and the beginning of an afterlife, if only in the memories of the living; death as a wish in the old and infirm, as a terror to the young and healthy; natural death versus unnaturally prolonged life, death by disaster, or suicide; death as the ultimate confirmation either of life's meaninglessness or of its meaning*ful*ness. Obviously, there's nothing new in these oppositions, nor do I claim to have answers where others have only been able to put forward questions. But I have been living with death, and I have at least pondered the questions surrounding it as they are posed in *The Sweet Hereafter.*

This film is based on Russell Banks's 1991 novel of the same title, whose deathless epigraph (not cited in the movie) suits this dark, contemplative picture:

> By homely gift and hindered Words
> The human heart is told
> Of Nothing—
> "Nothing" is the force
> That renovates the World—
> Emily Dickinson (1883)

The Canadian Atom Egoyan, who was born in Cairo, both adapted and directed *The Sweet Hereafter.* Yet there is little in Egoyan's previous films, all written exclusively by him, that could have presaged the humane richness of this new picture. His earlier work, often suffused with a black humor that's completely absent here, is simultaneously less accessible than *The Sweet Hereafter* because of its aesthetic preening and postmodern affectlessness.

One quality all of Egoyan's movies have in common, however, including this latest one, is a fragmented narrative that must be pieced together backward, either through flashback or by means of delayed, incomplete, and sometimes conflicting exposition. So it's easy to understand what initially attracted him to Banks's novel, which is narrated retrospectively by four different characters, three of whom receive a chapter each and one who gets two chapters. In so splintering his narrative, Banks's intent is not to demonstrate the relativity-cum-

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subjectivity of truth, since the stories of his narrators do not essentially contradict one another. This multiple first-person narrative does *isolate* each of the storytellers, however, and the destruction or fragmentation of small-town community is indeed one of the book's themes.

Egoyan sporadically employs a first-person narrative technique, voice-over, in his film of *The Sweet Hereafter*, but his real narrator, the camera, is omniscient, as it is in virtually all fiction features. So the director-screenwriter was faced with the problem of finding a cinematic equivalent for the sense of loneness shared by the characters in the novel, and he found it in two ways. First, he frequently cuts between or among faces in any one scene rather than holding the camera steady in medium-to-full shot on several characters together. And second, Egoyan makes a big-city outsider the main character, which has the effect of divorcing us somewhat from the townspeople even as they become very much alienated from one another. In Banks's novel, it is Dolores Driscoll who could be called the main character, for she has two chapters to herself—significantly, the first and the last. Egoyan's shift of narrative focus to the outsider, Mitchell Stephens, does not make his film unfaithful to its literary source; this adaptation manages to alter the voice and tone of the book without sacrificing its substance, which is to say that the movie turns a deeply felt but sometimes overemotional, sometimes overliteral moral tale into an evocative, compassionate mystery on the subjects of children, community, and catastrophe. No small part of this mystery is Stephens himself, which is one of the reasons Egoyan foregrounds him at the expense of the transparent Dolores.

Another reason is that, as a liability or personal-injury lawyer, Stephens is the only one in the novel who makes contact with the other first-person narrators—Billy Ansell and Nicole Burnell—in addition to Dolores, as well as with the non-narrating Walkers and Ottos. So, from the point of view of sheer cinematic action, he's the natural character around whom to center the film as he tries to solicit clients for a class-action suit against the town of Sam Dent or its province of British Columbia. (The novel was set in upstate New York's Adirondacks.) "There are no accidents," Stephens confidently declares from the start, in the movie as well as the book; *someone*, namely someone with "deep pockets," had to be to blame for the "tragedy" that has befallen this half-barren, half-beautiful, once-unified mountain community.

On a snowbound, icy morning on the outskirts of town the local school bus had skidded off the side of a hill and plunged into a semi-frozen lake, killing fourteen of the twenty-two children aboard. Among the survivors were the bus driver, Dolores Driscoll, and the articulate, teenaged beauty queen Nicole Burnell, who will be wheelchair-bound for the rest of her life. Among the dead were the widowed Billy Ansell's twins, Jessica and Mason; Risa and Wendell Walker's son, Sean; and Hartley and Wanda Otto's adopted little boy, Bear. In the aftermath of such a calamity, how does life go on? To whom do the parents turn for solace? Not to an ambulance-chasing attorney, the

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sparse population of this remote region at first seems to agree—and Mitchell Stephens is only one of a number of legal vultures who have swooped down on Sam Dent to prey on the eight families who lost children in the "accident." But Stephens doesn't view himself as a greedy bird of prey. He's already a huge professional success, he is not without humane impulse, and he gets paid only if he wins. "Let me represent your anger," Stephens exhorts one prospective litigant in the film, and through such representation he means to purge these bereaved parents of their anger if not their sadness. At least then, he argues, a vehicular catastrophe like this one—the result, he has to believe, of faulty manufacturing or maintenance, not of wreckless driving on the part of the impecunious Dolores—will be less likely to occur in the future.

Stephens is driven by more than his own humanity, however: he's haunted by the twentysomething daughter that he (along with the wife from whom he is divorced) has lost to heroin. He can deal with such a loss only through the surrogacy of this lawsuit, and it's a loss that torments him even more each time this taunting, frightening, itinerant young woman calls collect from somewhere with a demand for money. Stephens' motives are never made explicit in the movie, but, paradoxically, they are simultaneously overexplained and underexplained in the novel:

> I don't need a shrink to tell me what motivates me. A shrink would probably tell me it's because I myself have lost a child and now identify with . . . [t]he victims. Listen, identify with the victims and you become one yourself. . . . Simply, I do it because I'm pissed off . . . Besides, the people of Sam Dent are not unique. We've all lost our children. . . . I don't know if it was . . . the sexual colonization of kids by industry, or drugs, or TV, or divorce, or what the hell it was; . . . but the children are gone, that I know.

We get none of this verbiage in the film, either through voice-over or dialogue. Instead, Egoyan's *Sweet Hereafter* begins by visually stating the picture's theme, the parental love of children, with an overhead traveling shot of three sleeping people: the young Mitchell Stephens and his equally young wife, Klara, with their infant daughter, Zoe, between them. Next we cut to Stephens in Sam Dent, trapped inside a car wash in a metaphorical equivalent of the children's entrapment in the sinking school bus; here, at Billy Ansell's garage, he receives the first of several cellular phone calls from the nasty, drug-addicted Zoe; and, after crawling out of his immobilized, inundated luxury car, here he gets his first look at the muddied, crumpled school bus retrieved from the bottom of the lake.

But immediately before Stephens' sighting of the bus, Egoyan intercuts a brief interlude at an amusement park in which we get our initial hint of the incestuous relationship between Nicole Burnell and her father, Sam. Thus the director-screenwriter has subtly suggested, mostly

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through images, what Banks laboriously literalizes in words: not only the connection between Stephens' estrangement from his once beloved Zoe and Sam Dent's loss of its precious children, but also the buttoned-down rage he will use in the service of his clients—at this moment expressed toward his daughter over the telephone. Moreover, by means of the juxtaposed scene between Nicole and *her* father, Egoyan has shown the diametrical opposite of the extreme hatred Zoe has come to have for her father, and that he reflexively reciprocates: the excessive love that Sam Burnell has exhibited toward his daughter and that, for a time, she involuntarily returns.

As described above, the past exists on two levels in Egoyan's *Sweet Hereafter*: before the bus disaster on December 6, 1995 (1990 in the novel), and in its painful aftermath, commencing with Mitchell Stephens' arrival in Sam Dent. Present time in the film takes place in flash-forward, on November 29, 1997, inside an airplane carrying Stephens away from Sam Dent for the last time, to a big American city where he will rendezvous with the now AIDS-infected Zoe. There is no such present in Banks's book: there, the present is solely the narrative one from which each solitary narrator relates his or her tale. Egoyan invents this airplane scene and the character of the young woman sitting next to Stephens—a scene to which he returns several times—in order to give the lawyer someone to whom he can confide the dreadful story of his daughter's degradation—a story not yet finished, and which he cannot help assisting with his paternal dollars.

Coincidentally, this quietly concerned young woman, called Allison, was a friend of Zoe at school and is herself the daughter of an attorney. Clearly Allison is meant to represent the kind of person Zoe's father wishes his daughter had become: polite, well-spoken, well-groomed, and apparently accomplished. She doesn't say much during the flight because she need not, indeed should not. Her mere visage, combined with Stephens' own, says enough, particularly considering that we first encounter it shortly after the opening scenes. Allison is another "ingredient" added to the narrative's mix of children, in other words, and a welcome one, for she provides a counterweight to Banks's unalleviated chronicle of desolation.

That chronicle includes Stephens' treatment of the personal or familial as if it were the professional, his systematic substitution of the ice of the latter for the warmth of the former. And this becomes clear from a story he tells Allison about his Zoe's accidental brush with death as a child. While on vacation with her parents one summer on the Outer Banks of North Carolina, the napping little girl had been bitten by a black widow spider, with the result that her face, arms, and legs became swollen out of all proportion. Rushing her by car to an emergency room forty miles inland, Stephens had to be prepared to perform an emergency tracheotomy with a Swiss army knife if Zoe's throat closed up and stopped her breathing. He was so prepared but never had to cut into his daughter's windpipe: she was still breathing when they arrived at the

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hospital, where a doctor administered the antidote, Zoe's swelling receded, and she was back to normal in a few hours.

In Egoyan's *Sweet Hereafter*, Stephens tells this story without editorial comment, and we see images from it, so that *we* have to make the connection between his controlled role in his daughter's rescue and his equally controlled role in the proposed lawsuit on behalf of some of Sam Dent's aggrieved parents; so that *we* must perceive Stephens both as a controlling, even deadening or knifelike, force in Zoe's life and as a dominating, even divisive or cutting, force in the life of Sam Dent's inhabitants. Here, by contrast, is Russell Banks again to explain it all to you, in the person of Stephens himself—at least to spell out the first half of the above equation to such an extent that one feels robbed of the impulse to conjure up the second half:

> I can't tell you why I connect that terrifying drive to Elizabeth City over two decades ago to this case in Sam Dent now, where children actually died . . . but there is a powerful equivalence. With my knife in my hand and my child lying in my lap, smiling up at me, trusting me utterly, I felt the same clearheaded power that I felt during those first days in Sam Dent, when the suit was taking off. I felt no ambivalence, did no second guessing, had no mistrusted motives— . . .
>
> Now in my dreams of her, . . . Zoe is still that child in my lap, trusting me utterly—even though I am the man who secretly held in his hand the knife that he had decided to use to cut into her throat, and thus I am in no way the man she sees smiling down at her . . .

Nicole Burnell comes to view Stephens not as a smiling knife-wielder, but as a pied piper to the town of Sam Dent. Indeed, in one early scene, Egoyan has Nicole read Robert Browning's "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" (1842) to Billy Ansell's twins, for whom she regularly babysat before the bus accident. Then he threads verses from this "child's story," as Browning subtitled it, through the rest of the film; they continue to be spoken by Nicole, in these instances in voice-over; and they are always associated with either the legal activities of Mitchell Stephens or the incestuous acts of Sam Burnell, or, in *The Sweet Hereafter*'s climax, both at the same time. The use of this poem is Egoyan's invention—it appears nowhere in the novel—and it is meant to be a lyrical rendition of Nicole's feelings and ultimately her motives. In other words, it is yet another metaphorical substitute for Banks's literalism, here expressed by Nicole in her role as the narrator of the book's penultimate chapter:

> . . . I hated my parents . . . for all that had gone before—Daddy for what he knew and had done, and Mom for what she didn't know and hadn't done—but I also hated them for this new thing, this awful lawsuit. The lawsuit was wrong. . . .
>
> Why couldn't they see that? Why couldn't they just stand up like

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good people and say to Mr. Stephens, "No, forget the lawsuit. . . It's too harmful to too many people. Goodbye, Mr. Stephens."

Now Browning's pied piper leads the children of Hamelin to their disappearance, not in a lake or river, but in a mountainside, where

> A wondrous portal opened wide,
> As if a cavern was suddenly hollowed;
> And the Piper advanced and the children followed,
> And when all were in to the very last,
> The door in the mountain-side shut fast.
> Did I say, all? No! One was lame,
> And could not dance the whole of the way;

The piper steals these children because Hamelin's mayor and councilmen broke their promise to pay him a thousand guilders for ridding the town of its numerous rats, all of which had

> Followed the piper for their lives.
> From street to street he piped advancing,
> And step for step they followed dancing,
> Until they came to the river Weser,
> Wherein all plunged and perished!

"The Pied Piper of Hamelin" doesn't appear to be a gloss on *The Sweet Hereafter* for the obvious reason that Dolores Driscoll does not intentionally lead fourteen of Sam Dent's children to their deaths in an icy lake. But the poem is such a gloss if one regards it, more or less, as a reversal of the film, or the film's events as a reversal of the poem's. To wit, the fourteen children of *The Sweet Hereafter* are "stolen away" before the "pied piper," Mitchell Stephens, arrives (even as his own child has long since been lost to another pied piper: addictive drugs); Stephens is to be paid for "piping out" the "rat" that caused Dolores' bus to skid off the mountain pass, so that no such calamity can ever rob the town of its children again; and the grieving parents of Sam Dent—all of them except Billy Ansell, who refuses to join any lawsuit—break their promise, not by refusing to pay Stephens, but by engaging him and other attorneys (on contingency fee) for the purpose of *seeking* monetary damages.

This is Billy Ansell's view, in any case, and it becomes Nicole Burnell's: that the town has broken its *communal* promise and thus become divided against itself to such a degree that it cannot properly mourn its dead children, who for this reason are condemned to die again and again in their parents' hearts and minds. Particularly in Billy's, as he witnessed the accident, in the novel as well as the film, in perhaps the worst of all possible ways: from the truck in which he followed the bus every morning, waving to his two kids, who sat in the rear bus seat just so they

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could wave back. Helpless to do anything except summon aid that would arrive too late, Billy afterwards did the next best thing, to his mind: he broke off his adulterous but unloving affair with the unhappily married and similarly grief-stricken Risa Walker.

The crippled Nicole figures in Browning's poem as the lame child left behind—somewhat like the trailing Billy Ansell—when "the door in the mountain-side shut fast." In "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" this child is powerless, however, either to join his young friends or to do anything about their disappearance. Nicole is not so powerless, nor is Sam Burnell innocent of having broken a father's promise by "stealing away" his daughter with his own kind of piping—in Egoyan's film associated with his interest in rockabilly music (composed by Mychael Danna, who also provided the sometimes eerie or insistent incidental score), which he uses to seduce the aspiring songster in Nicole.

In *The Sweet Hereafter*'s climax, Nicole has her revenge against her grasping, guilt-ridden father and the searching, sublimating Stephens by giving eyewitness testimony, in a pretrial deposition, that Dolores Driscoll was speeding along at seventy-two miles per hour when the school bus careened off the road. Nicole is lying but her lie, in her view, is a malignant means to a benign end: the killing of the lawsuit, for now there is no one with "deep pockets" to sue for malfeasance. (At fifty-five miles per hour or so Dolores was not speeding, but, characteristically for this picture, the cause of the accident is otherwise left unspecified or unverifiable; in the novel, Dolores positivistically states that she hit her brakes when she thought she saw a dog up ahead, and that as a result the bus skidded off the road into a large sinkhole.) After Nicole tells her lie at the courthouse, the camera cuts between a tearful, chastened Sam Burnell and a shocked, defeated Mitchell Stephens as, for the last time, Nicole recites in voice-over from "The Pied Piper of Hamelin."

The filmmaker also gives Nicole the concluding lines of the movie—lines that belong to Dolores Driscoll in the novel—which she speaks in voice-over as well:

> All of us . . . who survived the accident, and the children who did not—it was as if we were the citizens of a wholly different town now, as if we were a town of solitaries living in a sweet hereafter . . .

The bitter aftermath of the accident is sweet for Nicole only in the sense that her father no longer attempts sexually to abuse his physically disabled daughter, so what can she be talking about here? Well, she's talking about a kind of living death that is sweet or blissful in the sense that she and the other survivors are, by virtue of their near-miraculous survival, forever oblivious to the normal stresses and strains, the sourness and sorriness, of everyday life. Nicole doesn't spell this out for us, which makes our deciphering of it all the more pleasurable. By contrast, Banks predictably dispels all mystery from the book's ending: his Dolores continues the narration quoted above with the observation that, "even if

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we weren't dead, in an important way which no longer puzzled or frightened me and which I therefore no longer resisted, we were as good as dead . . . Our [lives] . . . were gone forever but still calling mournfully back to us."

Dolores is also permitted by Banks to voice a sentiment in her final chapter that Egoyan's film *shows* us throughout, and that even the novel has already made implicit by virtue of its very structure: that "[a] town needs its children, just as much and in the same ways as a family does. It comes undone without them, turns a community into a windblown scattering of isolated individuals." *The Sweet Hereafter,* then, is not about children per se, but about how the loss of children—of their love—can lead to the dissolution of family and community. Thus is the child ironically made guardian to the man. A subject so infused with grief could easily have become mawkish, but Egoyan avoids sentimentality by deemphasizing Dolores Driscoll's featured role in the novel as the feeling victimizer unfeelingly victimized, and by putting in her place the contained, directed Mitchell Stephens, litigator.

He's played by Ian Holm, or I should say that, within his compact range, Holm sonorously plays every note on the equally compressed scale of his character's personality. This trenchant actor is complemented by a largely Canadian ensemble that has followed the thirty-eight-year-old Egoyan through his ever-growing career, including Bruce Greenwood as Billy Ansell, Gabrielle Rose as Dolores Driscoll, and Sarah Polley as Nicole Burnell. I can pay these actors no higher compliment than to say that each of them truly knows what the word "ensemble" means: not only to work together on a film, in mutual artistic support, but also to remain together over several films, so as to enhance one's own—and thus the pictures'—artistry.

The cinematographer Paul Sarossy is part of Egoyan's ensemble, having shot three of this director's previous films. Here Sarossy captures in his images not only the wet-wool feel of wintry living, but also the languid look of winter light, which includes the look of snow under that light. Snow in *The Sweet Hereafter* has colors other than solid or glistening white, as you might expect, and on account of its various shades this snow comes to symbolize something other than mere purity. Namely, its own paradox: that snow combines the ideas of ethereality and materiality, confinement and liberation, numbness and sensation, purgation and petrification, vista-vision and purblindness. These ideas are also contained in the narrative, so nature felicitously serves art in this instance, not the other way around (as in the cinema of spectacle). Something similar can be said about the bloodshed in this movie: it is the opposite of spectacular, of the gratuitously violent or mindlessly destructive, and therefore the epitome of all that is right, restrained, resonant, finally redemptive in human sacrifice.

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RICHARD HORNBY

O'Neill Our Contemporary

EUGENE O'NEILL LEFT ORDERS THAT THE MANUSCRIPT of his unfinished play, *More Stately Mansions*, should be burned after his death. His widow disobeyed, but when an adaptation by Karl Ragnar Gierow appeared on Broadway in 1967, the critics agreed with O'Neill that the play deserved incineration. Despite Ingrid Bergman in the starring role, with direction by José Quintero, whose record with O'Neill was otherwise outstanding, the production flopped.

Europeans have long valued O'Neill higher than we do; the Swedes even gave him the Nobel Prize. Perhaps he improves in translation, the emotional intensity remaining but the awkward prose turned readable and speakable. At any rate, in 1995 a stunning new Dutch production of *Mansions* caught the attention of James C. Nicola, Artistic Director of New York Theatre Workshop. He hired director Ivo van Hove to replicate his show in English. I had never thought much of Nicola's company in the past, but the resultant production, which I saw at Edinburgh last summer, reveals what a difference a brilliant director can make, with both script and performers.

Mansions, set in Massachusetts in the 1830s, is a sequel to *A Touch of the Poet*, the only completed play of a projected nine-part cycle on American history called (with O'Neill's usual linguistic tone-deafness) *A Tale of Possessors, Self-Dispossessed.* In *Poet*, young Sara Melody, daughter of Irish immigrants, takes up with Simon Harford, a sickly young scion of a wealthy New England family. Simon is an idealist, who will "never let himself become a slave to the greed for more than enough that is the curse of mankind." This sentiment seems more suited to the 1930s, when O'Neill was writing, than a hundred years earlier. Unlike August Wilson, whose cycle of African-American history plays shows an astute feel for each period he writes about, O'Neill lacks historical knowledge or intuition. Occasional period references seem lifted perfunctorily from some history text, as when Con Melody, Sara's father, notes aimlessly, "I see work on the railroad at Baltimore is progressing." The real power in O'Neill's writing, as always, comes from his personal obsessions—alcoholism, parent/child relationships, class distinctions, Irish-Catholic angst, and the battle of the sexes—which transcend any particular period. *Poet* is really about the agonies of Con Melody's Irish manic-depression, which come not from American history, but from O'Neill's own psyche.

More Stately Mansions opens in 1832, with Sara and Simon married.

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Sara's parents are dead, but Simon's mother Deborah is very much alive, so that the play settles into a mythic love triangle, with the two women battling for Simon's affections. Simon has recovered his health—he spent the earlier play offstage in bed—but when he takes over the family business after the death of his father, it erodes his moral idealism. He exploits his workers shamelessly, while ruining his rivals in predatory business deals. (This being a Depression play, it depicts big business as a zero-sum game; Simon cannot succeed without destroying others.) As a result, he feels like an outsider with his family. He asks his wife to become his secretary and "mistress," while denying his mother the rights to see her grandchildren without company.

Within a year, Sara is running the business even more ruthlessly than her husband did. Simon has signed most of his assets over to her, while becoming, in an Oedipal regression, ever more dependent on his mother. The conflicts in the play seem merely to repeat and intensify, with no resolution in sight.

The unfinished state of O'Neill's manuscript meant not that it was too short but that it was very long. By his own admission, the playwright's early drafts were always "intolerably long and wordy." Later, he would cut them back (not enough, in the opinion of many!), while working out the motivations and transitions that are the nuts and bolts of playwriting. When Gierow tried the same process on the *Mansions* manuscript, however, the result seemed stilted and sketchy. The realistic production of 1967 merely exposed these weaknesses. Most of the scenes consist of monologues, or stark two-character confrontations with sudden, drastic shifts of emotion. Characters lash out at each other, then instantly beg forgiveness: "Leave me alone! I beg your pardon for being so rude."

Van Hove's directorial solution to the dramaturgical problems was simply to chuck out realism altogether. Scenes were set on a bare, raked stage covered with orange carpet; actors sat at the sides, moving to the center for their scenes like boxers entering a ring. Metaphors in the text became literal in the staging: two feuding brothers literally got down on the floor and wrestled; a character described as childish spoke baby talk; when a line insisted that "You'll have to learn to strip life naked, to strip yourself naked," the actors did indeed strip. A love scene was played as a nude wrestling match, more brutal than erotic, which certainly expressed O'Neill's attitude toward sex.

The most amazing directorial choice, however, was the decision to have the actors speak the lines at breakneck speed. Jonathan Miller tried the same trick ten years ago with *Long Day's Journey into Night*, another wordy O'Neill play with interminable monologues, but the result was disastrous, turning the actors into mindless automata. That production also had an elaborate realistic set, in which non-realistic acting would never have seemed right, even with better performers. Van Hove, however, not only had a better style of staging, he also had a much stronger cast, who could race through the lines without losing meaning, managing the sudden emotional shifts like racing car drivers changing

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gears. Instead of degrading the language, the curse of most avant-garde theatre today, the speedy delivery gave it a heightened luminosity. Joan MacIntosh was magnificently spoken as Deborah, resonant, sure, intense, as she soared through speeches like the following: "Something? Outside me? No, nothing is there but me. My mind. My life, I suppose you might call it, since I have never lived except in my mind. A very frightening prison it becomes at last, full of ghosts and corpses." Instead of inchoate jottings, the words became a verbal aria. This production of *Mansions* became the kind of play O'Neill might have written were he alive today, non-realistic but subjective and imagistic, a poetic fantasia on a wild inner life. Maybe clunky old O'Neill did have a touch of the poet in him, after all.

I have long felt that MacIntosh could have been one of America's finest classical actresses—if we had a classical theatre worthy of her talents, and if she had not wasted much of her youth on avant-garde ephemera. Now middle-aged, she has become more commanding than ever, and is taking on some of the roles she deserves. She also had fellow cast members who matched her in ability: Tim Hopper, looking like a preppy New Englander, played the full scale of Simon's moral anxieties, while Jenny Bacon was tall, strong, and genuinely Irish-looking as Sara. And I should make special mention of Bart Van den Eynde, the dramaturg (literary advisor) for the production, whose analysis and interpretation of the script must have been a major force behind the success of this intelligent, imaginative production.

Speaking of great classical actresses, Dame Diana Rigg turned sixty last year, noting mischievously that she will henceforth be eligible for OAP (Old Age Pensioner) discounts at English theatres. In fact, she is now at the height of her career, taking on great classical stage roles in recent years with performances that place her in the top rank of English actresses. Americans know her mainly by her performances in the 1960s "Avengers" television series as the sexy, witty Emma Peel (lately re-created in a dreadful movie by Uma Thurman, Rigg's shadow on the wall of Plato's cave). Her stage performances keep the sex and the wit, but add great technical prowess and emotional depth.

Rigg trained at RADA back in the fifties, where she apparently had a rebellious time, finding it stuffy, but actually she bears all the trademarks of that institution: a voice like a Stradivarius, a commanding physical presence, and above all a commitment to characterization that American stars rarely even see as desirable. Personality acting is the ideal with us; the actor plays a charismatic self not only from one role to the next, but even in everyday life. Dame Diana has personality aplenty, but is not afraid to submerge it in the role, and does not feel the need to flaunt it every time she is out in public. A few years ago I was having a sandwich in the buffet of the National Theatre in London before her performance of *Mother Courage,* when who should come strolling across the lobby but Rigg herself, headed for backstage. Dressed in jeans and an old coat, she

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looked like a housewife out shopping. She was entirely alone; there were no entourage or photographers, and no one in the already-crowded lobby took any notice of her. (Or if some did, like me they would never have dreamed of bothering her.) Does this mean that we were indifferent to her? On the contrary, a few hours later we gave her standing ovations. She was the best Mother Courage I have ever seen. English audiences love her as an artist; her personal life is her own business.

After her successes as Mother Courage, then Medea, then Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Rigg took on Phèdre in Racine's play last fall at the Albery Theatre in London's West End, in a production sponsored by the wonderful Almeida Theatre, which has done her other recent productions. I have seen several versions of *Phèdre* of late, including a big Swiss-Austrian-German production at the Edinburgh Festival starring a tepid Valérie Dréville, and an adaptation entitled *Phaedra in Delirium* by New York's Classic Stage Company with an equally disappointing Katherine Chalfant, who is usually sure-fire. I began to wonder if the role is playable. Phèdre is intensely emotional on the page, but also so full of self-pity (always hard to play), so monotone in her agony, that in the theatre she usually becomes a bore. Nowadays, actresses usually underplay her, as Dréville and Chalfant did, but I have seen her done full out, and still spent the performance checking my watch.

This time, however, Rigg nailed the role. As always, her sexuality was a key part of her success. Phèdre is foaming with lust for Hippolytus, which can seem perverse even today, when women are supposed to be sexually liberated. Rigg managed to convey incredible yearning with her voice and body (though, of course, Phèdre and Hippolytus never even touch), swaying toward him, falling to the floor, moaning in a soft, resonant voice. She seemed passionate, but was never vulgar. The Japanese have a concept called *jo-ha-kyû*, great potential energy that is held in check, then gradually released. (Zeami, the medieval actor/theorist, advised actors to "move seven if the heart feels ten.") This is an important part of their traditional Noh Theatre, which though slow and static, can be highly dramatic. The drama in *Phèdre* is also *jo-ha-kyû*; the play is all yearning but no action, until Phèdre accuses Hippolytus of having attempted to seduce her (an early sexual harassment case?), which leads to Theseus cursing his son, and Hippolytus' terrible death at the hands of Neptune. Rigg was particularly good at playing potentiality; standing in shadow at the back of the stage, for example, waiting, hoping, and fearing to declare her passion for Hippolytus, she actually took the focus from the actors who were in the light.

George Henry Lewes, writing in the nineteenth century about the French actress Rachel, the best Phèdre in theatrical history, said that she was "the panther of the stage." Rigg's performance could be described in similarly feline terms. Nevertheless, Lewes went on to say that Rachel had "little tenderness, no womanly caressing softness," which was not true of Rigg, who humanized Phèdre. Not so terrifying as Rachel, Rigg

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nonetheless created a character we could identify with. Rigg even managed to find humor in the role, as in the line where Phèdre points out to her confidante that although Hippolytus' mother was an Amazon, she "nevertheless loved" (*elle a pourtant aimé*) in order to conceive, which Rigg tossed off with her typically wry smile. Stanislavski used to insist that, the more monotone a role, the more you had to seek out and play contrasts. Rachel, an actress of the Romantic era, playing in huge theatres under gaslight, would have rejected such a notion, but Rigg, under the influence of realists like Stanislavski, was more a Phèdre for our time.

The production was skillfully directed by Jonathan Kent, on a double bill with Racine's *Britannicus*; both productions will come to New York this season. Rigg was backed by a superlative cast, especially Toby Stephens, muscular yet innocent as Hippolytus, and Julian Glover, blunt yet poignant as Theseus. The setting, by Maria Björnson (who also did costumes), was a beautiful baroque interior gone askew, without a right angle in it. Mark Henderson designed powerfully murky lighting, but I could have lived without the smog effects, which are becoming the theatrical cliché of the 1990s. It is ironic that, at a time when air pollution controls have become very strict, polluting the air in theatres has become fashionably artistic.

Walter Kerr once panned a hapless piece with the line, "One more touch of whimsy, and I would have stormed the stage!" I thought of his wisecrack as I dozed through Beth Henley's new play, *Impossible Marriage*. Henley is trying to be a Southern, gentile Woody Allen, but the whimsy is so forced and manipulative that the play is unbearable. Allen creates sensitive zanies whom we care about; Henley creates cold-blooded dimwits whom we would like to clobber.

The play is set in the garden of a country estate near Savannah. Kandall Kingsley's younger daughter, Pandora (who would ever give a child such a name?), is getting married to Edvard Lunt, a middle-aged, drunken philanderer who wears a ponytail. Kandall's pregnant older daughter, Floral, tries to talk Pandora out of it. Edvard's unseen ex-wife threatens, via a letter, to kill herself if he remarries. Their son shows up, announcing, "After mummy's killed herself I plan to take my own life with an unsharpened hatchet." Instead, he ends up shooting himself in the foot. And so on. Henley strains mightily to make her characters eccentric: Kandall believes that fairies live under toadstools. Floral's husband adores her but does not like sex. He agrees to divorce her "because she snores." The father of her unborn child turns out to be the ancient preacher officiating at Pandora's wedding ceremony. Pandora's wedding dress has angel's wings. At least she does not fly—and neither does this play.

The production of *Impossible Marriage*, at the Roundabout Theatre Company's Laura Pels Theatre in Times Square, was clumsily directed by Stephen Wadsworth. Thomas Lynch designed a hideous green set,

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with awkward lines of movement. The show starred Holly Hunter as Floral, in her seventh collaboration with Henley. A movie star with considerable Southern charm, Hunter was pleasant to watch, though her swollen belly was weightless. (Perhaps she has never had a child herself.) The rest of the cast was dreadful, overplaying already overwritten roles with smart-alecky abandon. Is anything more insufferable than actors who think they are funny?

The San Francisco Mime Troupe was left-wing before it became fashionable, and continues to be, long after it has become unfashionable. Unlike other aging lefties, it has mercifully never succumbed to the desperation of political correctness. Its villains are not those who say "handicapped" instead of "challenged," or write "he" instead of "s/he," but good, old-fashioned capitalists.

The latest Mime Troupe piece, *Damaged Care,* which has been touring California (all their shows tour, and can be performed in the most primitive of spaces), takes on our capitalist health care industry. As hospitals are taken over by corporations, medical staff is cut, treatments are accelerated or even denied, and bureaucratic red tape threatens to destroy the system entirely. Only in America are hospitals run for profit! Elsewhere in the industrial world, it is recognized that while free enterprise works well enough in many areas of the economy, government must run, or at least closely regulate, those that lack competition. If potatoes at your A & P are expensive or of poor quality, you can buy them at Gristede's, but patients in America have little choice in their health care, except by selecting among a small number of equally bad HMOs. If you are unemployed, or employed in a business that does not provide health benefits, you do not even get that choice.

Now nearly forty years old, the Mime Troupe has lost none of its zip. (If anything, its older performers are its best.) *Damaged Care* is performed in commedia dell'arte style, with masked performers, songs, dances, and both verbal and visual jokes. The show also uses puppets, dolls, and simple scenery consisting of a few props in front of a booth with a cartoonish painted curtain. Commedia evolved in the Italian Renaissance as an improvised form involving standard character types—clever and stupid servants, braggart soldiers, young lovers, pompous doctors and lawyers, scheming merchants. The Mime Troupe has given these a modern twist: Arlecchino, a traditional servant figure (better known to us via his French name Harlequin), has a lump on his shoulder. He goes to a recently privatized hospital, Bologna General, where he meets young, dedicated Nurse Basil, who is frantic because of the hospital's budget cuts and increased workload. The two immediately fall in love. They are thwarted both medically and romantically by greedy, ruthless Doctor Capitano, CEO of Capacare, the corporation now running the place into the ground at a huge profit. The action consists of a loose series of conflicts between Doctor Capitano and a variety of patients and staff, highlighted by stock jokes and sight gags.

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Arlecchino tries in despair to hang himself but neglects to tie off the rope—a commedia joke that goes back at least five hundred years. One patient has a swollen hand the size of a manhole cover; another wanders through with a sword permanently stuck in his belly. Arlecchino's "treatment," when he can get any, largely consists of being whacked on his growing lump, but he gets a few back at Doctor Capitano as well.

Dan Chumley briskly and skillfully directed this all-too-short evening, with the funny script by Joan Holden and Karim Scarlata. The cast of *Damaged Care* was splendidly agile. I lost some dialog from a few of the performers, e.g., "I hate being a patient, it's worse than ??" is probably a good joke, but I could not hear the punch line, even though the show was miked and strongly amplified. Nevertheless, the movement and dance, mostly choreographed by Victor Toman, were always vigorous and clear. Toman also played the stabbed man, managing to turn rigor mortis into hilarious shtick. Velina Brown was delightful as Nurse Basil, beautiful (despite her big-nosed mask) and idealistic, while Michael Gene Sullivan was the archetypal Arlecchino, full of bounce, charm, and appetite. Ed Holmes was perfect as the Doctor, a comic Richard III, delightfully wicked and energetic. Unlike some of his younger fellow actors, Holmes is strong both vocally and visually, able to punch a joke with perfect clarity and emphasis, and to move with that special agility that some fat people can muster, like Shamu the Whale soaring up from the pool at Sea World.

I am always dubious about the ability of theatre to effect political change, but if anybody can do it, it is the San Francisco Mime Troupe. How come we Americans put up with such a rotten medical system? As Arlecchino notes at the end, "There's less of them than there are of us."

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JOHN LOUGHERY

Rothko or Pollock?

MARK ROTHKO AND JACKSON POLLOCK: two major names in modern art, never omitted from the textbooks and usually lumped together as part of one amorphous entity or another—postwar abstraction, Abstract Expressionism, the New York School. They are often seen, implicitly, as allies in a common cause, setting aside the deadwood of the past (i.e., imagery, narrative, social relevance). This is a good moment to reconsider the aptness of that association. Retrospectives of each painter were among the most stirring exhibitions to be seen last autumn, and they suggested that the differences between the two men illuminate more than the similarities. It could be further argued that those differences imply approaches to art and art history that are sharply antithetical.

The Mark Rothko retrospective, on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art after its earlier appearance at the National Gallery of Art, was all that it should have been. Over 100 works from the 1930s to 1970, the year of Rothko's suicide at the age of sixty-six, filled two floors of the museum, including a number of paintings owned by the family. The earliest works cry out the autobiography of their maker: Marcus Rothkowitz, son of Russian immigrant parents, gifted, restless, ill at ease even with himself, living on the edge in Depression-era America. The New York he painted was alternately stylized and claustrophobic, much like the dense, brownish self-portrait of 1936, the clumsy hands as thick and forbidding as the tinted spectacles that keep the world at bay. Surrealist art, with its emphasis on myth, biomorphic imagery, and the power of the unconscious, provided one way out of the prison of the self, and several examples at the Whitney of these frequently unsatisfying paintings (disconnected figures, hybrid friezes—like so many illustrations for a Jungian text) were the prelude to the "multiform" paintings of the 1940s. These are the paintings—with forms dissolving before our eyes, an ambiguous sense of space, unexpected arrangements of unexpectedly pale colors—that tell us how natural, how right, a means abstraction was for someone like Rothko; all the vestigial surreal imagery of the early works have nothing to say comparable to the moodiness, the renunciation, the occasional hesitancy, and the color-driven organization of these numbered, rather than titled, paintings. Influenced by Milton Avery and Clyfford Still they might be, but the "multiforms" are evocative in a new way in Western art. They manage to be refined and exploratory at the same time.

The bulk of the retrospective was taken up, of course, with examples

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of Rothko's now-famous mature style: huge vertical canvases filled almost to the edges with quivering rectangles and bands of pure or layered colors, simple, enveloping, fugue-like more than operatic, appealing to the most elemental emotions: foreboding, as in *Four Darks in Red* (1958); awe, as in *Orange and Tan* (1954); buoyancy, as in *Untitled* (1953). A "marathon of deletions," as critic Harold Rosenberg called the Abstract Expressionist venture, has yielded an irreducible essence. It is the glory of these works, properly spread out in the limited space at the Whitney, that they can be as paradoxical as they are: ostensibly simple in technique, but actually varied in their effects; imposing even when the soaking and staining of the canvas is at its most translucent; undeniably original—looking like nothing that has come before—but not unconnected to a dozen other, earlier paths in art, from the yellow mists of Turner and nineteenth-century Luminism to the brazen monochromatic color-saturation of Matisse, whose *The Red Studio* was an obsession for Rothko. The darker palette of the late 1950s and 1960s—blacks, browns, reds, and maroons—does not always evoke the high solemnity, still less the tragic gloom, Rothko intended them to, but the paintings dominated by orange, yellow, red, and tan are wide-open, and the invitation is to adventure and joy. If Rothko had his doubts about the possibility of true communication (and he loathed the idea of abstraction as a decorative or purely aesthetic experience), he never doubted that oil on canvas was a viable means to that communication.

A stateliness and a wholeness informs Rothko's canon (and it is a canon) that, in the end, is not so very different from a similar feeling in the content-restricted and tone-obsessed paintings of Vermeer, Chardin, or Bonnard. With each passing decade, Rothko looks less radical. He looks more sumptuous than edgy, though no less brooding and serious for all that. Not so Jackson Pollock. The retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the first in over thirty years and the most comprehensive ever mounted, reaffirmed his dramatic, even daunting iconoclastic status. Not Franz Kline, Ad Reinhardt, Jasper Johns, or Andy Warhol, not even Willem de Kooning or Joseph Beuys, presented a challenge to art lovers and other artists remotely comparable to Jackson Pollock's. The introductory wall plaques at MoMA which tell of a man who "ruptured traditions of art-making" and achieved "international notoriety" are right on the money. Too often museum shows labor long and hard to inflate the hot-air balloon of oh-so-shocking-in-their-time, an approach (from Impressionism to Pop Art) that can be both clichéd and enervating. Yet forty years after Pollock's death in a car crash, audiences must still do some fresh work with their own eyes and minds. This is a good, if surprising, situation. However, the late 1990s also turns out to be the right time for more debate about how exalted a value we want "tradition-rupturing" to be, or to remain—for asking how tight a link we insist on between furious iconoclasm and what we mean by "great art." The modernist litany of "make it new" is rarely brought into focus as clearly as it is with Jackson Pollock. But for Pollock and Rothko,

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the urge to "newness," to the vast and the "all-over," meant different things.

The first gallery of the MoMA exhibition instantly established the provocative tone. The viewer who needed to see apprentice work manifesting sound draftsmanship or a flirtation with traditional themes (as if they were a requirement for success as an abstract artist) was thwarted right away. Pollock never gave a hoot about drawing or still-life or landscape. The small untitled self-portrait (1931–1935) is a tortured oil on gesso on canvas, as dark and agitated a nod in the direction of the figurative as *Naked Man with Knife* (1938–1940). (It also makes the one Rothko self-portrait in the Whitney show seem positively cheerful by comparison.) But Pollock, this exhibition made clear, was also a man, for all his psychological difficulties and loner instincts, open to influences, and wide-ranging ones at that: the Mexican muralists, John Graham, Arshile Gorky, tribal art, Picasso and the Surrealists. In fact, in his concern for the spontaneous and the allusive, Pollock comes off in this show as a more authentic Surrealist than do most of those European painters identified by that heading. *She-Wolf* (1943) has an erotic, primal ferocity beyond most of Ernst's sexualized animalistic forms, and *Untitled (Blue (Moby Dick))*, also from 1943, can be "read" in the same way a literary Dali painting can, but is more truly anarchic and dream-inspired. Pollock was less afraid of being misunderstood than Ernst, Dali, Masson, et al. He was more willing to let go, and the timidity that underlies so much of classic surrealism is nowhere in sight. Yet the works that brought him to the attention and earned him the ardent support of people like Peggy Guggenheim—e.g., *Guardians of the Secret* (1943)—while passionate and volatile, are still, by anyone's definition, "paintings." Hieratic, symbol-laden, manageable. The true rupture was a few years away.

Then came *Mural* (1943), commissioned by Guggenheim for her New York duplex. Owned today by the University of Iowa Museum of Art, *Mural* is a painting as big as a Bierstadt or a Church, and a product of equivalent ego, that aims to have no focal point, to banish identifiable imagery, to render calculation and spontaneity equal (or at least indistinguishable), to sweep—or pressure—the viewer into the exuberant movement of hundreds of looping, curving lines of paint that appear to project beyond the boundaries of the canvas. Fluidity had finally come to an artist whose previous work is heavy, dense, and clotted, though its very desirability as a goal seems to have been called into question soon after. While Pollock stuck to his literary titles for a while (references to *The Tempest* and to astronomy abound), an actual animus toward his medium asserts itself; the buttons, matches, nails, cigarette butts, and coins embedded in *Full Fathom Five* (1947) are a form of violence, not a sea change, and it bespeaks a misdirected energy not so different from the restlessness about paint choices (oil, liquid enamel, aluminum paint) and the choking airlessness of some of the abstractions from the late 1940s. From three paintings from the "drip period" of

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1947–1951, however, we get a glimpse at last of the Promised Land. *Number 13A, 1948: Arabesque; Number 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist);* and *Autumn Rhythm* (1950) bring with their skeins of black, white, dull pink and blue a delicacy and lyricism that contemporaries must have found hard to believe was there, buried in the intemperate man who never seemed to know what he was looking for, but only what he didn't want and didn't like. Finally, Pollock showed that he knew when to stop, how to command his materials and define his own goals, and in the rooms at MoMA, whose proportions grew as the show proceeded, these three paintings were seen to the best imaginable effect. They also marked an end to Pollock's purely abstract period before, in the last five years of his life, the totemic faces and fragmentary images reappear.

Underlying the cultural myth of the unappeasably angry rebel is an outlook on continuity and renewal that is not to be ignored. This outlook implies that there are too many paintings in the world as it is, that the work of the past is more a trap to be resisted than a fount of inspiration, that what began with Raphael and Bruegel has run its course. It is an outlook easy to appreciate circa 1999 when contemporary abstraction, expressionism, and realism look equally tired and when museums groan beneath the weight of their own interchangeable acquisitions. Other art forms, other artists, have known the same frustration. Post-*Godot,* post-*Endgame,* Samuel Beckett followed a rigorous aesthetic logic to darkness and silence, admirably accepting the choking confinement of an ultimate rupture with the traditions of Western drama. Yet the truth is that most of us do not follow Beckett that far. Honoring his quest, we continue to be drawn to the intellectual loquaciousness of Shaw, the lavish emotion of Tennessee Williams—or the rich humor of Vladimir and Estragon. Nor, I suspect, do we really follow Pollock that far. Should we? Need we? (Another myth of our time: that artist and audience must share the same demons, psychological or aesthetic.) Pollock outruns us, in one sense; after all, the need to question the very nature of the art form and the personal anguish, whatever its roots, were his. It is not incidental that the number of "masterpieces" in the MoMA show could have been counted on the fingers of one hand. *Autumn Rhythm* and *Lavender Mist* are appreciated, even loved, it might be said, precisely because they are rarities—isolated gems—in a way that fine Picassos, Matisses, Rothkos, or Diebenkorns are not. But the curatorial thrust today seems to want to have it both ways: Pollock opted out of a "line" that extends from the Renaissance to World War II, yet engenders a new "tradition-rupturing" universe of his own, "freeing" himself and his successors. The dichotomy won't quite hold. A *process* born of doubt and rage can be a force unto itself—that is what we saw, triumphantly, at this retrospective—but it will not allow equal space for the fullness of an end result. If we demand a philosophical journey, a desperate and publicly acted-out ambivalence, *and* a completed, satisfying body of work, Rothko is likely, for many of us, to

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be the more plausible alternative, no matter how firmly the art-world spotlight is directed the other way.

At some distance from the conflicting currents of modern abstraction, two other exhibitions at the Whitney focused on contrary styles of representational art: Bob Thompson's narrative color-expressionism and Duane Hanson's *trompe l'oeil* sculpture. Almost as if the organizers of the Thompson retrospective didn't trust us to get the point, the walls of most of the galleries were painted bright yellow, and those of an inner room, devoted to smaller paintings and a video, a wilder (but oddly less obtrusive) red. In any event, Thompson's intensity of color—sometimes garish, sometimes effervescent—speaks for itself, and the featureless participants in his bacchanals, his retelling of scenes from mythology, and his reworkings of al fresco moments from Poussin and Lorrain draw us into his pictorial world as much by what is left unexplained in the story he is telling as by any pretense of narrative exactness or clarity. And then there are those fat monochromatic birds, red, blue, and green: soaring over his Fauve landscapes, flapping like mad, grabbed by their legs and arrested in mid-flight, or simply observing the human folly below. So much of Thompson's work seems to be about a fear of curtailment and a yearning for a lost Eden of music, languor, and love. Thompson himself, one of the most ambitious African-American painters of the sixties, knew something of that camaraderie with his Beat circle friends, and the affectionate portraits of Leroi Jones and Allen Ginsberg were two of the more relaxed pictures in the exhibition. Bob Thompson died at the age of twenty-nine, in 1966, and it is hard to get away from that sad fact with all the questions it raises about how he might have developed over the next three decades. As it is, while not a great artist, he left behind several intriguing and whimsical paintings, and a museum retrospective was long overdue.

In contrast, Duane Hanson's career was anything but truncated. He began making his life-size, plaster-formed, paint-slicked, bewigged and fully dressed sculptures of suburban Americans—always a dazzling experience on first encounter—thirty years ago and continued in that same vein since then, with resolute indifference to the changing tastes of the art world. A smart feature of the Whitney show was the inclusion of early work, like *Abortion* (1965), *Motorcycle Accident* (1967), and *Gangland Victim* (1967), which showed Hanson either working on a smaller scale—the victim of the failed abortion is a tautly sheet-draped figure only a few feet long—or in a more explicit vein of social criticism, depicting violence both random and intended. After that one gallery, however, it was the signature work en masse: construction workers, old ladies, A & P shoppers, people real enough to fool anyone at a distance of several feet. Growth or development is hard to detect in Hanson; he was as good in the 1960s at what he did as he was at the end of his life in the 1990s. *Seated Artist* (1971), *Football Player* (1981), and *Man with a Camera* (1991) were all created a decade apart, but there is little to

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distinguish them, no hints in craft or content to place them in the America of Nixon, Vietnam, and love beads vs. the America of Bush, the Gulf War, and the microchip. Is that an underlying point in Hanson's assemblages of the living dead, that change and drama have no part to play in the lives of his kind of people? The search for deeper meaning founders early on when seeing Hanson's sculptures in such quantity, and appreciating the skill required to make these elaborate forms becomes the sole, if ultimately pointless (and then monotonous) pleasure. *Flea Market Vendor* (1990) and *Body Builder* (1995) register a sense of lost energy, a faint confusion (What am I doing here in this gym? Will I ever sell anything at this flea market? What is this all about?), that can envelop the viewer as well, but even that emotion is also a trick effect. The energy behind the creation of these perfectly replicated forearm veins and creases on fingers, all this thinning hair and stomach flab, must have been prodigious. It is just not anything the viewer is able, or allowed, to share in. Perhaps context is everything in this case: placed as a small group in a shopping mall or the lobby of an office building, rather than in a museum, these sculptures would provoke a different kind of interaction, no doubt a more synergistic one, as the scientists say.

Winter wanderings: a trip to Washington, D.C. to see the hodgepodge of "Van Gogh's Van Goghs" and the elegant, informative "Edo: Art in Japan, 1615–1868" also led me to "The Art of the Gold Rush" at the National Museum of American Art. First displayed at the Oakland and Crocker museums in California, this show was the kind to drive aesthetic purists wild: minor artists one and all, not one indisputably great painting in sight, and a fair number of clinkers. But as social history, its impact was pronounced. Some of the paintings, most from the Gold Rush period itself (1848–1854), are plainly documentary, telling us what John Sutter looked like or how ramshackle San Francisco was before the Civil War. But a great many more existed for propaganda purposes, romanticizing a mania that brought thousands of "Argonauts," as they were called, to the West Coast to make their fortune. Probably the best known of these images is the robust *Miners in the Sierra* (1851) by Charles Christian Nahl and Frederick August Wenderoth, though E. Hall Martin's *The Prospector* (1851) and A.D.O. Browere's *Miner's Return* (1854) cover the opposite points of the experience—an excited first glimpse of the virgin land and a safe return home—with the same carefully orchestrated energy. Thirty to forty years after the Gold Rush ended, a wave of nostalgia for that tumultuous event swept the country, and several paintings from the 1870s and 1880s were included in the exhibition, even more saccharine than any produced at the time.

In and of itself, this show would have been instructive but quirky—even a bit creepy. The true meaning of the experience, however, was only to be felt by wandering ahead into another gallery at the museum where a separate exhibition, "Silver and Gold: Photographs of the Gold Rush," told more of the tale. In these darkened rooms, encased in old

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frames and plush, somber red velvet, dozens of daguerreotypes showed the real faces, leaner and less exuberant; the real bodies (including a few postmortem figures); the real landscape, more hardscrabble and unyielding than one sees in the oils and watercolors. The Gold Rush exhibitions were not only about the Forty-niners themselves, but about the role of painting in shaping a materialist outlook in nineteenth-century America and the comeuppance that inherently glamorizing art form received, briefly, from a new, less conniving, more honest medium. (How quickly the new medium could be turned to its own form of dishonesty was evident in the well-arranged exhibition devoted to Teddy Roosevelt, Rough Rider and President, across the hall at the National Portrait Gallery: first to last, a graphic and photographic display of Smithsonian hagiography. "Splendid little war," indeed.)

Honesty and artifice were to be studied in a more balanced and less devious form at the Pieter de Hooch exhibition at Hartford's Wadsworth Atheneum, the only site for this first-ever retrospective of one of the giants of Dutch painting. Having seen the show in its opening week, I have no idea if it will inspire in the ensuing months the kind of critical and popular response lavished on "Van Eyck to Bruegel" at the Metropolitan Museum or "Late Delacroix" at the Philadelphia Museum, but it was certainly in their league as an "event" for anyone interested in the history of painting. While never reaching the more mysterious depths of Rembrandt and Vermeer, de Hooch (1629–1684) was a key figure of the Delft school whose mastery of perspective and color values brought naturalism to a new level, but whose devotion to sunlight through windowpanes and the texture of cloth and tile recognized those elements as ends in themselves. What I had never appreciated before about de Hooch, a quality which can only be verified by a large but not a catchall show, is the way in which he balances the demands of documentary realism (i.e., what we learn at first sight from his paintings about seventeenth-century Dutch life) with the literary information he includes that requires decoding (the never-excessive number of objects on a floor or wall or table that have a symbolic meaning) with the full awareness that his viewer is just as apt to lose himself in the grain of a wooden table or a violin, the red of a blouse, the shine of a porcelain vase. The chronicler, the craftsman, and the aesthete met and harmonized in Pieter de Hooch to a degree that few painters have approached. This was an intelligent exhibition—no hype, no hoopla, no T-shirt reproductions—deserving of a large and enthusiastic audience. The odds of that happening are anybody's guess.

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ROBERT S. CLARK

Music Chronicle

IT SAYS MUCH ABOUT THE POWER OF CULTURAL ICONS in our celebrity-besotted society that, when the American scholar David J. Buch discovered Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's name on pages of a long-unexamined opera manuscript in Hamburg in 1997, it was front-page news for the *New York Times*. The opera in question was *Der Stein der Weisen* (*The Philosopher's Stone*), a multi-composer effort first produced in 1790 at the Theater auf der Wieden outside Vienna by Mozart's friend Emanuel Schikaneder, the impresario and librettist of *The Magic Flute*. A second-act duet from *Der Stein* exists in Mozart's hand, leading scholars to believe that he was one of five composers who contributed music to the collaboration. But none of the known copies of the score bore any further clues to the authorship of the duet or any of the remaining music.

Then, in 1991, the Russian government returned a collection of confiscated manuscripts to the City of Hamburg library, including the one Dr. Buch looked at. During the Allied bombing of Hamburg in the Second World War, the manuscripts had been sent for safekeeping to Dresden, where they were seized by the occupying Russian forces and shipped off to the Soviet Union. But apparently no one before Dr. Buch had examined *Der Stein der Weisen* after their return. When he did so, he found that the copyists had attributed almost every number in the opera to one or another composer. The words *"von Mozart"* appeared not only on the duet previously assigned to him, but on two other sections of the second act finale as well. The inscriptions have sparked debate in the musicological community about the attribution of the passages in question to Mozart.

But the significance of *Der Stein der Weisen* goes beyond the three passages that Mozart may have written—less than ten minutes of music all told. The whole opera is a paradigm of *The Magic Flute*, which was staged at the Theater auf der Wieden about a year after *Der Stein*. Not only do the two belong to the series of "fairy-tale" operas commissioned by Schikaneder, but the musical and dramatic influence of the earlier work on *The Magic Flute* is considerable.

Furthermore, based on the Hamburg manuscript information, four composers other than Mozart were involved in *Der Stein*, and all later had some connection to *Der Zauberflöte*. Schikaneder was the impresario and librettist for both operas, as well as the first Papageno; J. B. Henneberg conducted the rehearsals and most of the performances of *The Magic*

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Flute; Benedikt Schack created the role of Tamino and Francis Xaver Gerl was the first Sarastro. *Der Stein* is a flavorful slice of the vernacular theatrical life of the time, a communal venture that sheds light on a side of Mozart's life often obscured by the received idea of the underappreciated and doomed genius striving to keep body and soul together.

Martin Pearlman, artistic director of Boston Baroque, tells us that upon reading of Dr. Buch's discovery he immediately phoned the musicologist and began negotiations to obtain performing rights to the opera. So it was in Boston late last fall that the first modern presentation took place, in the New England Conservatory's Jordan Hall, in a concert performance under Pearlman's direction and using Buch's performing edition. At the time of the discovery of Mozart's name in the Hamburg manuscript, the spoken dialogue that links musical numbers in this *Singspiel* was thought to be lost. Buch subsequently found it, but for these performances the director Robert Scanlan prepared an English text, narrated by Alvin Epstein and Carmen de Lavallade, to tell the story, because, as Pearlman asserts in his program note, "the story is complex and completely unknown even to opera aficionados," and "it is important that the story and the musical context be made as clear as possible."

For audiences with twentieth-century expectations, the story is a typically silly exercise in the genre, blending the farcical and the magical with sentimental hijinks and low comedy. What is most striking about it is the way its elements match those of *Die Zauberflöte*. There is a well-born couple like Tamino and Pamina, a servant couple like Papageno and Papagena, a noble ruler like Sarastro, a series of sojourns from one enchanted or diabolical site to another, threatening interventions by hostile powers, rescues, separations and reunitings, and the final triumph of the powers for good. But, though it provides ample opportunities for patter songs, virtuosic arias, and extended ensembles, it lacks entirely the elevated tone Schikaneder and Mozart were able to impart to *Die Zauberflöte*.

But what of the music? Pearlman displays a bit too much charity, perhaps, when he calls the group around Schikaneder "talented collaborators who knew each other well and . . . regularly worked together in the theater . . . The result is an opera that is enjoyable to listen to on its own merits and a drama full of magical effects and humor." This observer would call the result charming and workmanlike, a curiosity engaging as a study in style and the sources from which a genius sprang, a single evening's diversion. And although Pearlman's further assertion that "the portions attributed to Mozart do not stand out from the work as a whole," again this observer imagined he could hear in them a richer elaboration, phrases stretched, developed, and finished with a defter hand, and a poignant sound to the orchestral ensemble that went beyond the routine skills heard elsewhere.

The performance was admirable. Pearlman's musicians, many of them playing on replica instruments, wrung from this odd score just

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about all the delight one could reasonably respect. String vibrato was light but telling, and string trills precise. Risky passages for the natural trumpets and horns were rendered ably, and the winds were brightly cheerful. The chorus sang with firm, pleasing tone.

The soloists, an amiable and accomplished lot, were faced with the all but impossible task of breathing life into the opera's cardboard figures. There was some evidence of struggle in the abundant florid passages, and consequently the most effective numbers were the simpler, more folklike ones. An exception was the virtuosic first-act aria for Astromonte, the "beneficent god" who presides over the characters' fate, that seems to prefigure the first aria for the Queen of the Night in *The Magic Flute*. Kurt Streit, a tenor, delivered its coloratura with vivacity and solid tone, some minor intonation problems to the contrary notwithstanding. For the record, the others were Judith Lovat, Jane Giering-De Haan, and Sharon Baker, sopranos; Paul Austin Kelly, tenor; Chris Pedro Trakas, baritone; and Kevin Deas and Alan Ewing, basses.

Martin Pearlman's secure, vivacious leadership had much to do with the evening's musical success. The English narration, the discursive glue between the musical passages, was sometimes strained and arch, but Epstein and de Lavallade did what they could with it.

The Metropolitan Opera's new production of *The Marriage of Figaro*, given its premiere last fall, surely ranks as one of the finest things seen on this stage in James Levine's tenure. Rarely in my experience of opera, where snares await at every turn, has every element coalesced with such apparent ease into a satisfying whole.

Paramount among the evening's virtues was the affectionate production by Jonathan Miller. It managed to make the most of the work's comic moments without in the least compromising the delivery of the music. For once sight gags—there were probably just enough—did not sap credibility and cheapen the action. For once, too, such things as Cherubino's concealing himself from the Count in the armchair in the first act and the free-floating mistaken identity in the final act (though there were no flora in the "garden"—the alternating entrances and exits took place through the palace's French windows) were not an affront to credulity. Peter Davison's sets framed spaces ample enough for a Spanish grandee without reducing the players to Lilliputians, and Mark McCullough's lighting struck the right balance between dazzling brilliance and warmth. James Atkinson's costumes were an agreeable complement to the rest.

When singers are confident of their support in the orchestra pit and comfortable with their stage surroundings, they are likely to deliver their best. The production's opening run was blessed with some of the day's most celebrated talent: Cecilia Bartoli as Susanna, Renée Fleming as the Countess, and Bryn Terfel as Figaro. Praise for this trio was almost universal, although Bernard Holland of the *New York Times* called Bartoli

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"a gifted clown" whose "physical comedy paved over the ambiguities that make Susanna so appealing." Of the three only Terfel remained when I saw the production: Barbara Bonney had replaced Bartoli, and Felicity Lott Fleming. Together with Susanne Mentzer's radiant Cherubino, Dwayne Croft's forceful Count, and the lesser players such as Paul Plishka's Bartolo and Wendy White's Marcellina, they made a splendid team, working through such touchstones of ensemble art as the second-act finale and the third-act recognition scene with grace and musicality. Bonney was afflicted with a cold, and although her fluent and characterful portrayal seemed hardly affected, she had to be replaced by Joyce Guyer between the second and third acts. The change was barely noticeable—a tribute to the professional aplomb of both singers and an illustration of the depths of talent this company can draw on.

Terfel's sturdy, assertive Figaro is widely admired, and he did not disappoint. His sound is sometimes crudely produced, but his is a major vocal instrument, and the variety of effects he commands was impressively deployed in bringing Figaro to life. Felicity Lott's Countess, sung with plangent tone and ravishingly sculpted phrases, was by turns coquettish, funny, buoyant, and fetchingly vulnerable, reminding the listener that this was once the charming and crafty Rosina of *The Barber of Seville.* Croft made the Count's vanity, rather than any innate ill will, the driving force of the role, and thus his contrition in the final act came as his realization of the humanity he shares with the others rather than an abrupt change of character.

Among the chief adornments of the production were the graceful embellishments of repeats and cadenzas by Lott, Terfel, and—spectacularly—Croft, whose divisions in the Count's revenge aria were literally a showstopper, particularly coming from a baritone. As James Levine sensitively led his remarkable cast and the commendable Metropolitan Opera orchestra, he looked pleased as punch, as well he—and the grateful audience—should have.

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WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

Authorizing Samuel Johnson

"JOHNSON'S REPUTATION IS OF THE MOST DEADLY KIND," wrote Marvin Mudrick in this magazine almost thirty years ago. Mudrick was reviewing the latest volume in the Yale edition of Samuel Johnson's works—in this case his periodical essays, diaries, and prayers—which Mudrick thought would do little to make his books more read. In his essay, titled "The Ogre at the Feast of Life," Mudrick praised Boswell for having written, in his *Life of Samuel Johnson*, "a book immeasurably greater than the collected works of his subject." Such depreciation of Johnson's works by comparing them to Boswell's biography was long ago set in motion by Macaulay in 1831, when he portrayed Johnson as a grotesque, freakish, Falstaffian character whose own works were fading away to obscurity. It is impossible, seventeen decades later, to inquire whether those works, in the eyes of the reading public, have faded any more than Pope's or Dryden's or Milton's or Ben Jonson's—who except academics and their dutiful students reads *any* older English writer? But most people interested in Johnson would agree that over the past fifty years he has received critical and biographical treatment that is distinguished and illuminating. Lawrence Lipking's fine new book is but the latest in a series that includes biographies by Joseph Wood Krutch, James Clifford, John Wain, Walter Jackson Bate and Robert DeMaria, Jr., along with critical studies by Bate, W.K. Wimsatt, Paul Fussell and many others.[1] Most recently Bruce Redford has provided a handsomely edited five-volume collection of Johnson's correspondence. And there is even a book on the rhetoric of the *Rambler* essays titled *Samuel Johnson After Deconstruction* that brings to bear on Johnson, for better or worse, the work of our contemporary Great Chams, Jacques Derrida and Harold Bloom.

Amidst all the specialist studies of Johnson in relation to this or that—to politics or religion or the arts or deconstruction—it is brave and admirable of Mr. Lipking to have written a "generalist" book about Johnson as author, addressed to the generalist reader. Lipking takes up, pretty much in chronological order, the main pieces of writing through

[1] SAMUEL JOHNSON: The Life of an Author, by *Lawrence Lipking*. Harvard University Press. $35.00. Before Lipking, the most useful introductory tours through Johnson's writing may be found in Fussell's *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Writing* (New York, 1971) and DeMaria's *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993). DeMaria has more recently published a fascinating account of Johnson's reading (*Samuel Johnson and the Life of Reading*, Baltimore, 1997).

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which Johnson survives: the letter to Chesterfield, *à propos* of publication of Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*; the poem "London"; the "Life of Richard Savage"; "The Vanity of Human Wishes"; the Dictionary; the *Rambler* essays; *Rasselas*; the Preface to the edition of Shakespeare; *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*; and *The Lives of the English Poets*. The claim implicitly made in these choices is that Lipking has something forceful, even new, to tell us about items central to Johnson's achievement as a writer, an author; this claim is handsomely substantiated in the book he has written.

Lipking's credentials as an eighteenth-century scholar of impressive learning were established with his first book of almost thirty years ago, *The Ordering of the Arts in Eighteenth-Century England*. Since then he has on numerous occasions written with an insider's authority about changing notions of the period over past decades, especially as critical focus has shifted from studying preeminent writers and their work—Dryden, Swift, Pope, Fielding, Richardson, Gray, Johnson—to social and political circumstances, to the contributions of women writers, to once marginal issues of labor, the poor, health, and other examples of what used to be called "background."[2] His assured purchase on what seems like virtually everything written on eighteenth-century writers is evident. With particular reference to Johnson we see this in the scrupulous footnotes to chapters that acknowledge someone's contribution Lipking makes use of or at least informs us of. These acknowledgments are invariably generous, and he is generous as well to his predecessors who have written books about Johnson. Unlike some biographers and critics, he doesn't pretend that his point of view hasn't been touched, or enhanced, or altered, by some previous laborer in the vineyard. There is a confident sense of large spiritedness about his whole critical enterprise.

That enterprise is staked out in the Introduction by Lipking's gloss on his subtitle, "The Life of an Author," as "not the life of a man but the life that he put in his work." The notion of authorship has become a contested one in recent decades after the underminings practiced on it by Barthes ("The Death of the Author") and Foucault ("What Is an Author?"). But in fact there was an earlier detectable "slippage," as Lipking finds it, in the series of four definitions of "author" in Johnson's Dictionary; from "The first beginner or mover of any thing: he to whom any thing owes its original," down to the decidedly more modest "a writer in general." Lipking is concerned to show how Johnson made himself into an author; how, despite his doubts, self-lacerations and gloom about any human endeavor, he could eventually speak, in his Preface to the Dictionary, in the first person and "for"—as its representative in this great work—the English nation. Indeed, in the Preface to his edition of Shakespeare, Johnson speaks not for just a nation but the whole world:

[2] See "Inventing the Eighteenth Centuries," in *The Profession of Eighteenth-Century Literature* (ed. by Leo Damrosch, Madison, Wisconsin, 1992).

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> *Shakespeare* is above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life. . . . His persons act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated, and the whole system of life is continued in motion. In the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual; in those of *Shakespeare* it is commonly a species.

But it would be deeply mistaken to assume that this authority came easy to Johnson: from the beginning, Lipking shows, he maintained a doubleness of attitude toward authorship, of "enormous ambition combined with preemptive dejection." As a moralist his great, in some ways his only, theme was—as Bate described it decades ago and in Johnson's words, the "hunger of imagination which preys incessantly upon life," and which by its very nature, can never be satisfied. In Lipking's words, and with special reference to the case of his subject, "the dream itself precipitates its own disenchantment." Wordsworth gave that theme a slightly different spin at the famous moment in his poem "Resolution and Independence" when he declared that "As high as we have mounted in delight, / In our dejection do we sink as low." In Johnson's terms, the extent to which your imagination hungers will determine the power of the ensuing disenchantment, as in Wordsworth's poem "fears and fancies thick upon me came, / Dim sadness and blind thoughts I knew not nor could name." Here, psychologically, Johnson and his Romantic successor were at one, though Johnson never managed to "solve" the problem as Wordsworth thought he did in his poem by producing, from nowhere, The Leech-gatherer.

Lipking's first chapter, "The Birth of the Author," is an especially strong one, containing as it does a brilliant close reading of the famous letter to Chesterfield, written after Chesterfield had anonymously recommended the forthcoming Dictionary. A few months afterwards, Johnson wrote to him, reminding him of their past relation or lack of it ("Seven years, My lord have now past since I waited in your outward Rooms or was repulsed from your Door") and delivered the goods to his putative—but only putative—patron:

> Is not a Patron, My Lord, one who looks with unconcern on a Man struggling for Life in the water and when he has reached ground encumbers him with help. The notice which you have been pleased to take of my Labours, had it been early, had been kind; but it has been delayed till I am indifferent and cannot enjoy it, till I am solitary and cannot impart it, till I am known and do not want it.

Lipking's commentary on this section may be quoted in full, as typical of his perspicuity. The climatic word of the letter is *known*—"till I am known and do not want it":

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> The rule of emphasis that Johnson followed generally put most weight on the end of a period. Hence the third of three parallel clauses, completing a cadence, was meant to be very emphatic. Clearly, Johnson stresses how much he does not want Chesterfield's notice. "Want" means primarily "to be without something"; the would-be patron encumbers the writer with help he does not need. But "want" also stands for "desire," and the weight on the word conveys a great weariness, a desire to be free forever from that old yearning for favor. To be *known* is more solid than to be famous or praised; it implies an integrity that can stand out in public. Johnson no longer sues for favor or struggles for life. He is not the person whom Chesterfield thought he knew; his work will speak for itself.

It should be noted that such critical procedure on Lipking's part is as much a matter of registering something heard—the voice of the author—as something seen and understood.

His discussions of Johnson's major works are satisfyingly instructive for the way they combine old-fashioned virtues of setting the work historically and biographically, with internal commentary on its language. One example, a particularly enlightening one, is his handling of Johnson's great poem "The Vanity of Human Wishes." This reader at least has tended to engage with it as a timeless specimen of moral satire, the debt to Juvenal notwithstanding. Lipking reminds us that its date of appearance, 1749, was "postwar" (after the martial failures of "the bold Bavarian," Charles VII, and of Charles XII of Sweden), but also post-great writers: Pope had died in 1744, Swift the next year, and (though not at all a "great" writer) Johnson's friend Savage in 1743. As for the prevailing atmosphere in English verse, "Night thoughts and graveyards cast shadows on [it]," notes Lipking, noting as well that Johnson's wife was sick and approaching death. In opposition to forward-looking (or pre-Romantic) poets of his time, like Akenside or Gray or Collins, Johnson stayed loyal to the heroic couplet he inherited from his Augustan predecessors, but made of it something new, a resistant, massively individual idiom consisting of what Ezra Pound was later to call, with reference to "Vanity," a "triumph of the perfectly weighed and placed word." Such attention to words so placed would be natural, perhaps, to the operations of a lexicographer; but only Johnson could have turned his lexicographic virtues into the poem that resulted.

When Lipking descends to local demonstration of how perfectly weighed and placed are the poem's words, he quotes the concluding couplet in Johnson's portrait of the "sinking statesman" whose "burning to be great" has now suffered a serious dampening. (As I write, a contemporary statesman, Mr. Gingrich, has just decisively sunk.)

> For now no more we trace in ev'ry Line
> Heroic Worth, Benevolence Divine:

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> The Form distorted justifies the Fall,
> And Detestation rids th'indignant Wall.

Lipking describes how we now see the picture "cut out of its frame in disgrace":

> Implicitly the couplets reproach the faithlessnesss of retinues and parasites, who justify themselves after the fall of their patron by looking askance at his portrait. "Line" packs in many meanings: not only features of the face, the painter's strokes, and a poet's flattering verses, but also genealogy. What viewers once recognized in the painted face was not mere family likeness but inherited virtues, Worth and Benevolence so unmistakable that they assumed a visible form, like members of the family.

But things have changed, England has changed, and the poet's feelings are "projected onto ideas and things":

> The personified Detestation and Wall collaborate on shedding the hated portrait, but they do not seem to like each other much. The Wall might be indignant not only about the face it has borne but also about being defaced (a touch of the Latin *indignitas*, indignity, may cling to it), and Detestation might be leaving an empty patch on the Wall as well as clearing it. At any rate, the amount of hatred seems excessive, directed at a mere form. Humanity is nowhere to be seen; and that is the point.

Lipking's contextual placing, followed by engagement with couplets and lines of verse, makes the poem available to us as something more than a "timeless" anthology favorite. His close reading of selected passages shows us why, if we didn't know it already, Johnson's friend and onetime pupil, the actor David Garrick, said that "The Vanity of Human Wishes" was "as hard as Greek."

One finds similarly useful criticism in the pages devoted to *Rasselas* and to the Shakespeare preface. But Lipking's judgment—and any reader of Johnson will I think endorse it—is that *Lives of the Poets*, the last project in a life full of projects, is Johnson's critical masterpiece, his most personal and also most "common" effort, inasmuch as he has become "surrogate for a literate nation." The famous sentences about Thomas Gray with which the volume originally closed (a life of the forgotten Lyttleton was later added) exploit the word "common": "In the character of his *Elegy* I rejoice to concur with the common reader; for by the common sense of readers uncorrupted with literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtlety and the dogmatism of learning, must be finally decided all claim to poetical honours." Lipking describes this as a moment in which Johnson merges the public judgment with his own: "Johnson's whole career as an author has led to this moment." But we see everywhere in the *Lives* this deference to and

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concurrence with the common reader, a reader who no longer and perhaps never was on sea or land.

Still, Johnson invokes him, or wills him into being. My own favorite instance of this, one out of many, occurs in his commentary, from the life of Pope, on the *Essay on Man,* "certainly not the happiest of Pope's productions," says Johnson by way of beginning. In two longish paragraphs he teases Pope for his attempts at wisdom in the field of "metaphysical morality" and his provision, through four epistles, of "much that every man knows, and much that he does not know himself." Then, abruptly, the third paragraph changes perspectives and key, without even the ghost of a transition, into admiration of Pope's wizardry that Johnson assumes all readers must share:

> This essay affords an egregious instance of the predominance of genius, the dazzling splendor of imagery, and the seductive power of eloquence. Never was penury of knowledge and vulgarity of sentiment so happily disguised. The reader feels his mind full, though he learns nothing; and when he meets it in his new array, no longer knows the talk of his mother and his nurse.

The rightness of these declarations is inseparable from Johnson's own predominance of critical genius; his seductive powers of eloquence disarm us so that we scarcely think to question what this man so obviously knows to be the case.

Lipking says, interestingly, that in reviewing the poets from Cowley to Gray, in recording the great achievement of national genius to be observed in Milton, Dryden, Pope, Swift, and their minor brethren, Johnson was also reviewing his own career and looking once more, into "the dream of authorship" he had so largely and continuously indulged. A few years before he wrote the *Lives,* and in a letter Lipking doesn't quote, Johnson wrote to Mrs. Thrale on the occasion of his just-passed sixty-fourth birthday:

> The return of my Birthday, if I remember it, fills me with thoughts which it seems to be the general care of humanity to escape. I can now look back upon threescore and four years, in which little has been done, and little has been enjoyed, a life diversified by misery, spent part in the sluggishness of penury, and part under the violence of pain, in gloomy discontent or importunate distress.

He says he will try to be "content," but then, as is his wont, adds a further grim reflection to the substantial one already expressed:

> In proportion as there is less pleasure in retrospective considerations the mind is more disposed to wander forward into futurity, but at Sixty Four what promises, however liberal of imaginary good, can Futurity venture to make. Yet something will be always promised, and some promises will always be credited. I am hoping, and I am praying

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> that I may live better in the time to come, whether long or short, than I have yet lived, and in the solace of that hope endeavour to repose.

However much "better" he lived in the eleven years that remained to him, however much he may have reposed in that hope, his active, combatively argumentative, and wholly personal performance in the *Lives* was something no previous English writer had come within miles of—and the intense pleasure that comes from reading this endlessly rereadable book has been amply testified to. But imagine, at age sixty-four, and after having authored the Dictionary and the edition of Shakespeare, *Rasselas*, the *Rambler*, and "The Vanity of Human Wishes," plus a raft of journalism, biography, poems and translation—to say, and with full sincerity as it seems, that "little has been done"! Johnson could say it because he had, among others, Milton, Dryden, and Pope (not to say Shakespeare) to look back on and against whom to measure his achievement in letters. In writing these biographical and critical accounts he recalls, in Lipking's words, "his own journey through life."

In this connection it is a nice stroke of Lipking to end his discussion of the *Lives* by considering Johnson's relation to Dryden, especially since Johnson himself suggested it in the *tour de force* that concludes the biographical section of the life of Pope. Through three paragraphs a comparison between Dryden and Pope is pursued with all the elegance and ingenuity of a writer at the top of his bent ("Dryden's page is a natural field, rising into inequalities, and diversified by the varied exuberance of abundant vegetation; Pope's is a velvet lawn, shaven by the scythe, and leveled by the roller"). Then, the parallel having been established at length, Johnson concludes: "And if the reader should suspect me, as I suspect myself, of some partial fondness for the memory of Dryden, let him not too hastily condemn me; for meditation and inquiry may, perhaps, show him the reasonableness of my determination." This moment is notable for its unique combination of the cautiously apologetic ("as I suspect myself") and its unambiguous conclusion—with all perhapses canceled out—in which "the reasonableness of my determination" is asserted.

Lipking has an ingenious, though not far-fetched explanation for Johnson's preferring Dryden, who compared to Pope and Milton was "all too human." Dryden is not, for Johnson, beyond the reach of lesser mortals; his foibles and faults—of negligence, hasty writing, the unevenness of many of his compositions—are part of a poetical character with which Johnson could identify. After all, his own work gave evidence of such imperfections. The roughness of temperament ("Dryden's was not one of the 'gentle bosoms,'" writes Johnson) is a further point of contact. Lipking reminds us of what I had forgotten or never knew—that in his earliest years Johnson had wanted to write Dryden's Life; now, nearing the end of his own literary career (Lipking's chapter on the *Lives* is titled "Touching the Shore"), his project of adding something to "English" has come to fulfillment. With a flourish, Lipking sums it up:

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"[Johnson's] life as an author has not, after all, been in vain; he has carried on Dryden's work."

As I read and assented to the lovely collocation between Johnson and his predecessor, I found myself thinking of a poem of Dryden neither Johnson nor Lipking mentions. Written six years previous to Dryden's death, his verse epistle "To My Dear Friend Mr. Congreve" was prompted by the production of Congreve's second play, *The Double Dealer*. In a way not unlike Johnson's own in the *Lives*, Dryden places the younger Congreve in relation to his contemporaries in the drama as well as to the ancestor of Congreve and the rest of us, in a triplet that ends with one of the best alexandrines ever written: "This is your Portion; this Your Native Store; / Heav'n that once was Prodigal before, / To *Shakespeare* gave as much; she cou'd not give him more." Dryden ends by presenting himself as "worn out with Cares and Age," as abandoning "th'Ungrateful Stage"; there follow the most moving ten lines he ever wrote, and ones that surely touched Johnson:

> Unprofitably kept at Heavn's expense,
> I live a Rent-charge on his Providence:
> But You, whom ev'ry Muse and Grace adorn,
> Whom I foresee to better Fortune born,
> Be kind to my Remains; and oh defend,
> Against Your Judgment, Your departed Friend!
> Let not the insulting Foe my Fame pursue;
> But shade those Lawrels which descend to You:
> And take for Tribute what these Lines express:
> You merit more; nor cou'd my Love do less.

Lawrence Lipking should be proud of his own tribute to Johnson, a work no less of learning than of love.

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DAVID MASON

Varieties of Poetic Experience

POETRY'S CURRENT CULTURAL POSITION IS A STRANGE ONE. It surfaces in the mass media with astonishing frequency—I'm thinking of how lines from Browning guide a recent film, *The Sweet Hereafter*, of Loreena McKennitt's musical settings for poems and Robert Pinsky's appearances on "The NewsHour"—and you might think this indicates real popularity. Yet in other ways poetry seems just another disposable product, published to secure tenure or as a steppingstone to the best-selling memoir. Poets are admired in some cases for their suitability to one social camp or another, and the notion of writing something truly exquisite and unforgettable occurs, it would seem, to few of them. How rare it is to find a contemporary poem in which every word *counts*.

In truth, however, poetry has always resided somewhere between extremes of prose and song, or what Auden called Prospero and Ariel. Perhaps this is most true of narrative or epic poetry, which cannot sustain its lyric peaks and stumbles into inevitable valleys. Among the new books under consideration here, the narratives of W.S. Merwin and B.H. Fairchild present rare and undeniable virtues, but so do the brief, intense poems of Timothy Murphy's debut collection, which could hardly be further removed from the lackadaisical mainstream of contemporary American poetry. And between these extremes we have the capable first collection of Robert Richman and new books by two masters, Derek Mahon and Karl Shapiro. None of these books is flawless, but each in its way feels like the work of a careful maker, leaving me rather hopeful about the state of the art.

Perhaps inevitably, Merwin has taken some missteps in his long, prolific career. Why, for example, should his early talent for sound and form be sacrificed to his broadly apocalyptic vision? In some of his work I have admired the erudition but felt the poems were eerily disembodied, as if dropping conventional punctuation had set them a bit too free of the earth on which they would matter most. I do not feel that way about his new epic, *The Folding Cliffs*.[1] Merwin has become a poet of the Pacific Rim in more ways than simply residing there, in Hawaii. On his personal journey to our western extreme, he has carried considerable experience of Europe, as well as America's eastern seaboard, and of course he has encountered all those Asian influences travelling in the

[1] THE FOLDING CLIFFS, by *W.S. Merwin*. Alfred A. Knopf. $25.00.

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other direction. *The Folding Cliffs* is, in a sense, Merwin's most successful melding of the many forces that have made him a poet.

These sensibilities have often been informed by ecological politics, implicitly postcolonial. "Lives of the Artists," a poem in *Travels* (1993), derives in part from a book that I consider to be a great epic of the American West: *Cheyenne Autumn*, by Marie Sandoz. Though written in prose, this novel may be as close to Homer (its historical plot resembles Xenophon's *Anabasis*) as anything in our literature. Merwin's new book is also the story of terrible injustices, this time inflicted upon native Hawaiians by whites who wanted their land. Like Sandoz, Merwin has a real story to tell, and like so many real stories in our time, his derives from the clash of cultures.

In the first of seven sections, we encounter a Hawaiian woman, Pi'ilani, climbing a mountain in the rain, and we are not sure what she is climbing toward. She stops for a while at the home of Anne Sinclair Knudsen, the Scottish widow of a Norwegian rancher who was known to be sympathetic to natives. This meeting of Ann and Pi'ilani is quietly moving because neither woman can forget "the distance in place between them like a pane of glass / that had always been there. . . ." We learn that Pi'ilani's husband, Ko'olau, is dead, buried somewhere on the mountain. He was a rebel, and the authorities have just declared for propaganda reasons that they have located his grave. Anxious to know the truth of the matter, Pi'ilani leaves Anne's house and continues up the mountain:

> . . . and Pi'ilani stepped out
> into the sunlight that changed her into the color
> of a shadow and she went down the nine steps like a shadow
> and up the trail among the old trees and was gone and there were
> only the trees as Anne stood looking and she could almost
> see what she had known there and would not see again
> faces and garments in the sunlight of the early days
> husband children friends certain that it was all theirs
> the certainty swelling their voices as they sang
> their hymns under those trees on the mountain repeating
> their claim to the wilderness . . .

Despite this passage's proximity to cliché—the Christian outsider compared to the naturally camouflaged native—our sense of both women deepens as Merwin layers in the particulars of their lives, and this first section climaxes in a powerful scene with Pi'ilani alone on the mountain.

It's Merwin's next move that gives the book an epic grandeur. Just when he has caught our interest, he leaves his characters and leaps back to the volcanic birth of the islands, shifting from human to geological time. This is a section Merwin has prepared for in prose and poems since he first moved to Hawaii in the late 1970s. Not only do we get the

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emerging islands, but also his paean to local plant and animal life. This is his book of Genesis, his garden before the Fall. The son of a Presbyterian minister, Merwin is careful to give us more than one set of begats, treating Eastern and Western cultures with near-biblical distance and equanimity. We see the arriving Polynesians who would populate the islands and add their evolving cosmology, then come the whites, James Cook and others, who introduce Christianity, cattle ranching and STDs. We meet the ancestors of Pi'ilani and Ko'olau, and slowly comprehend that we are being led back into human time, the individual lives that are the usual province of the novelist.

The plot concerns leprosy, which is "The sickness . . . that separates people," and leads to the systematic destruction of much traditional Hawaiian society. Merwin avoids melodrama; though he does have a villain in the person of one greedy land developer, he understands that the horror of this Holocaust is as much a matter of bureaucratic policy. One of the book's most touching scenes occurs when Ko'olau's sister has been taken away to a leper colony. Ko'olau wants to deliver a box of her belongings to her, but does not know where she is or understand the postal system of the whites. Merwin details this young man's slow road to rebellion as a tragedy composed of both evil and well-meaning forces. He sees cultures as delicate ecosystems that mutate to survive. His folding cliffs are a locus of story, song and memory, juxtaposed to the official histories that miss so much human truth, as Pi'ilani seems to understand: ". . . the life she had thought of as her own was past / it was gone and she woke into what was not there. . . ."

Stories have structures, of course, and here Merwin's form is deeply satisfying. If I compare *The Folding Cliffs* to another postcolonial epic, Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, I find that Merwin lacks the St. Lucian's verbal brio, but he does more honor to his tale than Walcott. This is the most beautiful and humane work Merwin has done to date, shaped with great care and self-effacing justice.

As a rule, we shouldn't review books by our friends; nobody will believe we've been objective. I choose to review *The Deed of Gift* (written by one friend and published by another) because I am afraid it will be misunderstood by critics who see only what they are accustomed to seeing. If much contemporary poetry is a wide, lazy river flowing to a sea of prose, Timothy Murphy's work is a stone in the midst of it all.[2] A lot of stones, in fact. Many of these poems are so brief and densely written that readers expecting the usual wordiness may be tempted to cast them aside like so much gravel. Don't do it. *Listen* to these poems. Read the book straight through and notice how a world accumulates, bit by bit, its own uncanny power.

Murphy's influences will be clear enough to anyone steeped in traditional poetry: Frost, Yeats, Wilbur, Burns, Hardy, the prose of

[2] THE DEED OF GIFT, by *Timothy Murphy*. Story Line Press. $12.95p.

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Norman Maclean, the *Greek Anthology* and its modern counterpart, Cavafy, the Australian A.D. Hope and a range of Asian poets and painters. Yet Murphy is more than the sum of his influences. A venture capitalist living in Fargo, North Dakota, he is as individualistic as they come. Here's one of his farming poems, "The Godless Sky," from the book's first section:

Airborne, I view the flood.
    Flattened wheat
    blackens in the heat
or smothers under mud.

In the Piper's path I spot
    the farmstead
    on the home spread
my father's father bought.

An uncle stauncher than I
    bears the cross
    of another loss
under the godless sky.

If you can find a tougher farming poem than this one, it's probably another poem by Murphy. He understands that modern farming is not the pastoral paradise the TV executives try to feed us, but a business pulled apart by the whims of nature, contradictory regulations, falling crop prices and the greed of banks. Some of these poems seem bitten off more than written down, and the cumulative experience of the book is almost totally devoid of sentimentality.

Murphy makes no secret of the fact that he is gay, but some of his love poems would move or delight readers of any sexual persuasion. Here is "The Quarrel":

Climbing in sullen silence past treeline
where blasted spruces drunkenly incline,
we stumble on two racks of caribou.
Clasped in a deadlock neither bull could break,
they bleach beside a frigid Yukon Lake—
amateurs who never locked horns with you.

Even poems that are little more than jokes work because of Murphy's command of form. Here, in another mood, is his "Infernal Sonet":

Which would provoke more joy,
to ravish you with Donne's
Holy Sonets or poke your buns?

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Cheeky boy
sleeker than any lumpish lass,
stop squirming and hear me read.
Your mind has greater need
of stuffing than your ass.

This technical command (often in short lines) may not be apparent to readers attuned more to open emotion than to rhyme-rich lyrics. In fact, at least one reader I know has found Murphy too rich, a poet who overloads his poems with more sound effects than their slight bodies can bear. In the case of a few lyrics, like "Bad Medicine," in which "birches" rhymes with "besmirches," I agree. But other sound-driven poems, like "Harvest of Sorrows," a *tour de force* with a base measure of amphybrachic dimeter, stand out to me as wonderful eccentrics. Murphy's world is populated not only with tough farmers, bankers, sailors, hunters and their prey, but also with dozens of tight little forms—the sort of varied brevity we saw previously in a poet like Robert Francis.

Publishing his first collection at forty-seven years of age, Murphy is part of a generation of poets for whom rhyme (especially full rhyme) once seemed anathema, yet there is not a single unrhymed poem in this sound-besotted collection, and some of those rhymes—like "tolerance" and "sons" in "Letter to A.D. Hope"—are very witty. I could also single out good, fully-developed poems like "The Gift of Hera," "The Path Mistaken," "The Track of a Storm," "Haunted by Waters" and "Sunset at the Getty," but perhaps this book's brief title poem best displays Murphy's gifts:

When Frost quavered for Kennedy
  I didn't understand
how tenuous is our tenancy
  in this untitled land.

How should we mourn a President
  whom Hollywood embraced,
an aristocratic miscreant
  with literary taste?

Under a graveyard's mossy wall
  Frost rests his snowy head.
"This death impoverishes us all,"
  our short-lived leader said.

The first thing I noticed in B.H. Fairchild's new book was its title, which, like some of Murphy's best poems, suggests that the exacting demands of real work (or play, as the case may be) are a kind of faith,

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a way of surviving chaos.[3] Fairchild's technique, however, is much looser. His poems are generally long-lined and colloquial, achieving their formality by narrative means. The second thing I noticed about his book was that it began with a masterful poem. "Beauty" moves from the Bargello in Florence to "the dry fields of Kansas," telling a story of a young man, presumably a version of the author himself, growing up in a tough world in which he never heard men speak of such things as beauty—that is, until he heard Robert Penn Warren and Paul Weiss discussing the subject on a radio program.

The men in this boy's family work at a machine shop, a far cry from the museums of Florence:

> Late November, shadows gather in the shop's north end,
> and I'm watching Bobby Sudduth do piece work on the Hobbs.
> He fouls another cut, *motherfucker, fucking bitch machine,*
> and starts over, sloppy, slow, about two joints away
> from being fired, but he just doesn't give a shit.

Yet even in this world Fairchild can find beauty: the arc of a Fritos bag hurled in the trash, the work of making objects at the lathe. The very word, *beauty*, takes on various meanings, from tossed off slang to our highest aesthetic intentions, as stories accrue and lead us to a fine, justifiable near-epiphany. Very few books of contemporary poetry begin as well as this one, and Fairchild sustains the high level much of the way. I've seldom read poems that deliberately come this close to prose without succumbing to lethargy. In "The Book of Hours" he displays unassuming erudition, while the next poem, "Cigarettes," is surely one of the best ever written on that pleasantly poisonous subject (see my comments on Derek Mahon, below). In Fairchild's ironic juxtapositions, "Body and Soul" turns out to be a poem about baseball, "Keats" about a mad perfectionist who "ran the lathe next to mine." "A Model of Downtown Los Angeles, 1940" quotes Orson Welles as well as T.S. Eliot—typical of Fairchild's easy command, as is the bookend title poem connecting lathes with Leonardo.

I would be hard-pressed to think of poets more unlike each other than Merwin, Murphy and Fairchild, yet the urge toward excellence distinguishes each of these books from the crowd. In some ways it is more difficult to distinguish the quiet art of Robert Richman, who until now has been better known as an editor than a poet.[4] For one thing, Richman is more inclined to observe the ordinary suburban world without much lyric intensity or narrative drive. When his poems move away from his usual cityscapes, their vehicle is reading, as in the verse memoir entitled "Egypt":

[3] THE ART OF THE LATHE, by *B.H. Fairchild.* Alicejames Books. $9.95p.
[4] VOICE ON THE WIND, by *Robert Richman.* Copper Beech Press. $10.00p.

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> And yet I didn't care much for the *feats*
> *Of Pharaohs in both peace and war*, or their
> *Prodigious vanity* (the jacket's words).
> I cared about the way the book sparked hopes
> Of more books than I ever bargained for.

Perhaps, too, the mutedness and modesty of Richman's work makes one less inclined to shrug off its flaws: his anti-scientific stance in "The Fossil," for instance, a too-easy reliance upon words like "soul," or weak lines and phrases in a few other poems. Yet this first collection has a large number of poems in which steady observation pays off, like his portrait of "The German Super," or one Sadie Silver in "Electric Sadie Land." There are still more poems in which Richman gives us sharply-realized moments, like the "*shhhhh* of rain / on the street" in "1:00 A.M." If Richman's emotional and experiential reach broadens as his technique matures, he will be a poet to watch.

Some critics have wished Derek Mahon's range would quit broadening so much, and that he would return to the tightly-wrought, ironic poems of earlier collections. The long lines of whimsy and rumination in *The Hudson Letter* and now *The Yellow Book* have left some readers cold. I am not one of them. There is a quality of intellect in this recent work—its varied influences, verbal play and thematic design—that beggars the work of many other writers. *The Yellow Book* is Mahon's *Autumn Journal*, much like MacNeice in its congenial (sometimes jaundiced or wistful) meditations.[5] While I hope Mahon does not permanently abandon the memorable lyric, I still find him mordantly amusing, and never a bore.

This is Mahon's take on our own *fin-de-siècle* world as he writes in his attic flat, his *atelier*, in Dublin. Images of the late nineteenth century abound, beginning with a poem composed "after Baudelaire" and including poems that refer to Dowson, Johnson, Symons, Le Gallienne and Wilde. The decadence Mahon explores can also prove a kind of home,

> a place of warmth and light,
> a house of artifice neither here nor there
> between the patrician past and the egalitarian future. . . .

These lines are from a poem about Elizabeth Bowen, so Mahon's book throws chronology to the winds as it paces through public and private lives in the last century or so. "At the Chelsea Arts Club" begins, "Everything aspires to the condition of rock music," and ends with this little speech:

> Maybe I'm finally turning into an old fart
> but I do prefer the traditional kinds of art,

[5] THE YELLOW BOOK, by *Derek Mahon*. Wake Forest University Press. $15.95; $9.95.

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respect for materials, draughtsmanship and so on—
though I'm in two minds about Tank Girl over there,
the Muse in chains, a screw-bolt in one ear,
the knickers worn over the biking gear. . . .
Best in the afternoon when the bar is shut,
the smoking room, an empty Chekhov set,
stained ochre, yields to silence, buttery light,
euphoria and nostalgia, so let me write
in praise of yellow while it is still bright,
of crocus and freesia, primrose and daffodil,
the novels of Huxley, Rimbaud's missing vowel,
yahoos, yippies, yuppies, yoga, yoghurt, Yale,
apricot and tangerine, babyclothes and toys
prohibition, quarantine, caution, cowardice, buoys,
lamplight, gaslight, candlelight, illness, fog. . . .

The list goes on, ending with "the little patch of brick Swann liked so much." If this is a jaundiced poet, he's still capable of love.

I suppose I read Mahon because he's good company, disillusioned in the best sense. His "America Deserta," a "postscript to 'The Hudson Letter,' " refers to "a nation singing its heart out in the business pages." Like Fairchild, he has a good poem about smoking:

. . . What *use* is it, you ask, as we exhale
clouds of unknowing with our last gasp. Well,
it suggests alternatives to the world we know
and is to that extent consoling; also
'a man should have an occupation of some kind'.

Mahon isn't done with this world yet, I would say. He leavens his melancholy. In one glimpse he is "a highbrow with a hunched gait and quick forensic eye," a variation on Heaney's fisherman with a "turned observant back." He complains of psychiatrists and the world of "enforced sobriety," all those who want "An age of prose" instead of "lyrical madness," yet he seems to accept, if grudgingly, his own self-imposed limits. Mahon's poetry of mind is true meditative satire, a gift in part because of its rarity.

The Wild Card, the title of Karl Shapiro's *Selected Poems, Early and Late,* suggests not only "something to conjure with," in the words of Stanley Kunitz, but something rare and unexpected.[6] This book reminds us that Shapiro is definitely not to be discarded. Apparently, its publication was aided by Robert Phillips, as well as by Kunitz and his co-editor, the late David Ignatow. The fact that several poets have come together like this,

[6] THE WILD CARD: Selected Poems, Early and Late, by *Karl Shapiro.* University of Illinois Press. $18.95p.

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culling so much good work from Shapiro's out-of-print collections, makes the occasion triply encouraging.

Thirty years ago, no one would have dreamed that Shapiro would be as neglected as he has been of late. In 1942 his first full-length book, *Person, Place and Thing*, drew immediate attention to a poet of strong technique and social consciousness. Not only did he write good lines, many of which still stand on their own legs, but several whole poems that are very fine, like "A Cut Flower." His style was already a high vernacular, and his stanzas sometimes attained the complexity of the Metaphysical poets, though Auden was clearly also an early master.

Shapiro's second book, *V-Letter*, was written while he served in the Pacific. He won the Pulitzer Prize for it, and a few years later, at thirty-three, was made Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress. Though the title poem of *V-Letter* is superb, I find myself liking Shapiro's war poems much less than his others. The famous "Elegy for a Dead Soldier," modeled on Milton's "Lycidas," strikes me as a failure, self-consciously literary to a fault. But poems like "Magician," "The Synagogue" and "The Intellectual" are utterly commanding and fresh. In fact, I don't think I cherish any one of Shapiro's books so much as I do a number of his individual poems. Postwar poems like "Homecoming" and "The Conscientious Objector" hint at the irreverence that was to come, and "Recapitulations" gives the illusion of effortlessness I so often find in Auden.

By the time he wrote "Going to School," a Phi Beta Kappa poem for Harvard, his ambivalence about formality of any kind was surfacing, and in the 1960s—most famously in *The Bourgeois Poet*—he wriggled free of what he called "The Poetry Trap." He no longer wanted to be "a poet whose trash basket was rifled by scholars." While the best of his prose poems, like "Nebraska" and "Foxhole," have a bitter precision that elevates them above self-indulgence, I'm sorry Shapiro abandoned his gift for the verse line, even if only for a time. Yes, some of his early poems were overwrought and too allusive, as if he wrote to please professors, but the verse line can also be used in poems of great simplicity and power, as he surely knows, because he has since returned to various kinds of verse.

Having worked free of influences like Auden to develop his own conscience and voice, Shapiro proves generous toward his early masters. A sonnet in memory of Auden concludes, "God bless this poet who took the honest chances; / God bless the live poets whom his death enhances." Maybe it's wrong to think of living poets being "enhanced" by the death of an elder one, but I can think of many living poets whose efforts have been made possible by the living Karl Shapiro, and even more who will never be half as good.

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BROOKE ALLEN

Sorcerers' Apprentices

THE APPEARANCE IN BOOKSTORES OF THE BOUND, published version of the Starr report mere hours after its release is yet another proof that something in our culture has radically changed: not so much the death of outrage, as William Bennett would have it, as the death of privacy, or of simple decency. The fact that those who govern feel that it's not only necessary but *perfectly all right* for us to know every detail of someone's sex life appears to be quite unprecedented. Is it even legal to expose these facts? If not, what legal recourse is there? If Bill Clinton were a mere private citizen, mightn't he himself file a lawsuit to protect his privacy?

The same questions inevitably pop up in regard to certain recent memoirs. That which has made the biggest impression on the public is Paul Theroux's *Sir Vidia's Shadow*, the story of the author's thirty-year friendship with the older, more established author V.S. Naipaul and its very sticky end.[1] Theroux, of course, is a past master at exposing the intimate lives of friends and loved ones to public scrutiny. His companion novels *My Other Life* and *My Secret History* both feature protagonists who are to the ordinary reader—and even to the informed one—indistinguishable from Theroux himself, and characters who seem exactly like his ex-wife, Anne, and other family members. Anne Theroux and Paul's brother Alexander have complained, but to no avail: the novels, Theroux insisted, were fiction—*art*—and if you confuse them with reality, you must be some kind of a philistine.

The premise of *Sir Vidia's Shadow* has outraged a substantial portion of the literary community, but Theroux has been quick to claim the moral high ground: not, this time, by arguing that his book is art and therefore subject only to the dictates of art, but by insisting that it is "the truth," and that it was, after all, his friend Naipaul himself who always insisted that only the truth can set you free. "Naipaul always said, *Don't prettify it*, and *The greatest writing is a disturbing vision offered from a position of strength—aspire to that*, and *Tell the truth*."

We should all be able to agree that truth must be the object both of fiction and nonfiction; but what purpose is the writer asking the truth to serve? Why, in other words, has Theroux written *Sir Vidia's Shadow*? Why is it important that we know the truth about Naipaul and his nasty little

[1] SIR VIDIA'S SHADOW: A Friendship Across Five Continents, by *Paul Theroux*. Houghton Mifflin Company. $24.00.

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habits? For while I have no doubt that what Theroux writes about Naipaul is, if one-sided, the truth, I feel at the same time that he has been less than truthful about his own motives in writing the book.

In print and on the podium, Theroux has given rationales that sound impeccably high-minded. The book was a technical challenge: "I realized that there was no model for it. Some books existed in which a writer described his or her relationship with another older writer, but these were always glowing accounts . . . ," he wrote in the *New York Times Book Review* (November 1, 1998). Also, he'd like us to think that he really meant the book to be a tribute. Naipaul is fanatical, yes, but we are reminded that "the best writers are the most fanatical; so the truest portrait of a writer can never be a study of virtue" (ibid). This is true, but it fails to convince this reader, at any rate, that the composition and publication of *Sir Vidia's Shadow* was anything but an extremely hostile act.

"I'm not a spurned lover in writing this book," Theroux said in a recent lecture. And possibly he's not, in spite of the rude end his long-time friend put to the relationship, cutting off communications and, by way of explanation, simply advising Theroux to "Take it on the chin and move on." But another reason for Theroux's hostility springs irresistibly to mind, and that is professional jealousy. Theroux himself refers to his younger self, in relation to Naipaul, as a sorcerer's apprentice, and although there are only eleven years' age difference between the two writers, the relationship was from the beginning one of master and disciple. The problem was that in the intervening years the disciple, however famous and successful he became, never quite caught up with the master. It is by now evident that Paul Theroux will never, like Naipaul, be a "great writer," Nobel Prize material. He remains what he was twenty years ago: a competent author of middlebrow potboilers, and a readable and justly-acclaimed travel writer.

This is not the first time Theroux has written about Naipaul. Back during the days of his youthful discipleship he wrote an academic study, *V.S. Naipaul: An Introduction to His Work.* Some years later he profiled Naipaul in the London newspaper, *The Telegraph.* After the appearance of that article Theroux noticed that "some people had come to like [Naipaul] on the basis of the piece, others had said they found him insufferable, on the same evidence." I suspect that the same will be true of this book, in spite of the press's prudish squeals of disgust over what is just a little too easy to interpret as racism, snobbery, and elitism on Naipaul's part.

There is, for example, his habit of referring to everyone he disrespects as "infies." When the two writers first meet as teachers at Makerere University in Uganda, Naipaul dismisses as infies all of their colleagues, jawing away asininely in the staff-room. It is to be sure a cruel and ruthless way to speak, but don't most of us, in our heart of hearts, know an infy when we see one? After Naipaul's departure from Makerere, Theroux has to admit that he has lost most of his pleasure in the place;

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looking around him he sees, in spite of himself, through Naipaul's eyes, and what he sees are—it cannot be denied—infies.

Naipaul's pronouncements on what he observes in Africa are brutal, and in setting them down in print Theroux knows very well that the p.c. police will swoop down on Naipaul with cries of "Racist!" Yet what Naipaul was saying was much more complex than mere racism, as Theroux is well aware. Africa, Naipaul thought, was (this was 1966) "an obscene continent, fit only for second-rate people. Second-rate whites with second-rate ambitions, who are prepared, as in South Africa, to indulge in the obscenity of disciplining Africans." The teachers at Makerere were "overpaid expatriates patronizing Africans and giving the impression of imparting an education. . . . The worst of it was the tameness of it all, the absence of criticism, the complacency, the extravagant way African effort was praised." This praise Naipaul referred to as "Blackwash."

Theroux is generous and honest enough to admit that Naipaul's uncompromising attitude came from his "impossibly high standards. He said there was no point in having standards unless they were high. He did not compromise. He expected the best, in writing, in speaking, in behavior, in reading." Yet Naipaul's dismissive remarks sting, as Theroux means them to. He refers collectively to Arabs as "Mr. Woggy"; he encourages his African houseboy unwittingly to demean himself; occasionally he gets in a temper and takes the wheel of the car provided by Makerere, humiliating his driver by making him ride in the back seat. There is a pronounced sadistic streak in Naipaul that his onetime disciple can't resist pointing out.

But if Naipaul has a sadistic side, so too has Theroux, although in this memoir he invariably portrays himself as naive, kindly, well-disposed toward all the world. It is in his depiction of Naipaul's wife Pat that Theroux really gives himself away. Pat is in every way her husband's foil, gentle, polite, softhearted and yielding, an irresistible target for a sadistic husband, and Naipaul, of course, bullies her. From time to time she breaks into "helpless blubbing, either as the result of a disagreement or simply because of some sorrowful sight—broken shoes, a snotty-nosed child, a woman bereft, a gardener laboring on his knees." Her abjectness—the "tears on her pretty protruding lips"—is erotic not only to the husband but to the young acolyte as well: "I did not know why, but her weeping made me want to hold her and fondle her breasts."

Sorcerer's apprentice indeed! During one long stint at a Kenyan hotel, Naipaul, hard at work on a book, asks the younger man to "Keep Pat company," having incidentally remarked not too long before that he himself had given up sex. Theroux, rightly or wrongly, interprets this as an invitation to embark on an affair with the pretty and pliable Pat, although he claims to have been too shy to avail himself of the opportunity. (Pat, he hints, would have been only too eager.) Throughout the two men's friendship, to judge from Theroux's account, poor

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Pat was an object of mixed lust and contempt not just to her husband but also to his eager pupil.

Theroux accuses Naipaul of misogyny, and points to numerous incidents in his work that confirm this diagnosis. Yet long before this one, Theroux's own books had always struck me as being full of gratuitous misogyny: the view of women in *Girls at Play*, to take one example, is twisted and unmistakably hostile. Throughout *Sir Vidia's Shadow*, though, Theroux paints himself as someone who holds the fair sex in the highest regard. He claims to have been deeply shocked by the scene in *A Bend in the River* in which Salim beats his lover and spits between her legs; his disgust was such, he says, that as one of the judges for the Booker Prize that year he decided to vote against the book, the disclosure of which fact can only have been calculated to enrage Naipaul, and which was not strictly essential to the narrative.

Theroux has done his level best to harm his former friend, all the while whitewashing his own motives by reiterating how extraordinary, how brilliant, how very remarkable Naipaul was. It is a clever performance but also cheap and hypocritical. One emerges from the experience of reading *Sir Vidia's Shadow* thinking that while it must have been uncomfortable and expensive to be Naipaul's friend, it must also have been invigorating, and that he has proved in the final reckoning to be a far more provocative and intellectually valuable writer than Theroux himself. The lessons he offered Theroux—and there were many—constituted ample payment for all the lunch and dinner checks he failed to pick up.

"Every good book suggests that the writer, however painful its subject, has arrived at some inward peace about it, some inner resolution, even of anger and despair, even though this peace and resolution is purely temporary," Naipaul told Theroux. By this criterion *Sir Vidia's Shadow*, positively throbbing with rage and wounded ego, has badly failed.

Theroux's act of vengeance, though, is as nothing to Rosemary Mahoney's *A Likely Story: One Summer with Lillian Hellman*, an account of the author's two-month stint, some twenty years ago, as household help to the famously grouchy writer at her Martha's Vineyard home.[2] It is a book that easily outdoes Theroux's in venom and pointlessness.

In 1978 Rosemary Mahoney was seventeen years old, a scholarship student at St. Paul's School in New Hampshire. She came from a troubled and chaotic home: her father died when she was eight, possibly a suicide; her mother, with one leg paralyzed by polio, had to care for seven children and support the family on a schoolteacher's salary. Not too surprisingly Mrs. Mahoney took to the bottle, though she seems to have done a remarkably good job with her family nonetheless.

As the memoir begins, young Rosemary has just read Lillian Hell-

[2] A LIKELY STORY: One Summer with Lillian Hellman, by *Rosemary Mahoney*. Doubleday. $23.95.

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man's autobiographical writings, *Pentimento, An Unfinished Woman*, and *Scoundrel Time*, and has come to idolize Hellman, naively accepting the writer's romantic portrayal of herself: "I was dazzled by her depiction of boat trips across the ocean, train trips across Europe, terrifying flights across Siberia, Nazis and Fascists, Communists and Stalinists, Hemingway and Faulkner, epigrammatic conversations in which the wise and moral Lillian was always slamming some ruthless yet simple-minded dupe smartly into place with a withering retort. . . . When Hellman wrote about her smallest experiences, they had the feel of epic adventures with epiphanic endings." Starstruck, Mahoney writes Hellman and asks whether she needs any household help over the summer. Somewhat to her surprise she receives an answer: yes, Hellman is looking for—and I quote—"a part-time live-in *housekeeper* for the summer months and asked if I could *cook*" (italics mine).

I stress these words because, although she read and reread Hellman's letter, Mahoney seemed to think that she was being invited to join Hellman in the capacity of companion or even friend. "With Lillian Hellman I would finally be touched by the world at large," she enthused, "and the world would have a chance to be touched by me."

Mahoney's letdown was swift and acute, then, upon her arrival in Vineyard Haven. First of all, Hellman was not the glamorous figure the girl had imagined but a shrunken old lady, nearly blind: "Her face was a pattern of downward-running flesh, like cake batter running down the side of a mixing bowl." Secondly, Hellman's expectations about what the job should entail were quite different from those of her prospective employee. She needed Mahoney to act as chauffeur, housecleaner, valet, and butler: "In short, I would be her servant." Surprise, surprise! Still, although Mahoney hated to clean, despised cooking and those who cared about it, and felt that turning down someone else's bed was, as she puts it, "the most pointless and precious activity anyone had ever thought up," she agreed to give it a whirl.

Now I should admit up front that I knew Hellman, and that I also know most of the Vineyard people Mahoney writes about in this book. I don't see, though, that this necessarily makes me a biased reader. As a matter of fact, I will admit that Mahoney captures the irritable and bossy Hellman to a T. Here she is, for example, playing her regular game of Scrabble with Rose (Mrs. William) Styron: "When Rose got a good long word, Hellman congratulated her and pretended to be pleased, but I could tell by the look on her face, the heated slant of her eyes, the way she sniffed, rubbed her fingertips together as if ridding them of crumbs and the prim set of her mouth that she was bugged and threatened. She smiled with her lips together, took a tiny sip of her drink, and said, 'Touché, Rose,' with false indifference."

Now this is true, and it is funny. So is the description of Hellman on the telephone: "She called the beauty salon and barked for an appointment, she called a couple of friends and barked at them too, but in a

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coarsely festive way. She said *fucking* and *shitty, faggot* and *kike,* with cheery abandon, and she laughed and coughed uproariously."

Not so funny, though, are Mahoney's cruel and bizarrely frequent physical descriptions of Hellman, such as: "Her body was so skinny and old it was like a scientific event looking at it this way, like finding a large fragile fossil embedded in stone, or the mummified remains of a three-thousand-year-old man preserved in a bog." For a young, good-looking girl to dwell obsessively on an old person's ugly body is truly nasty. Why does she hate her so very much? Hellman, by her own admittedly not very stellar lights, was in fact reasonably friendly to her young employee. Her real and unforgivable crime, in Mahoney's eyes, is the fact that she was not *interested* in her, failed to recognize how *special* she was, although to be frank there is no conceivable reason why she should have, for the teenaged Mahoney seems to have had little to recommend her: "I didn't read the newspaper much," she remarks blandly, "and was usually bored or disgusted by the television news. . . . It wasn't important to me to be 'up' on any of that. . . . When it came to current events I often gave in to my own whims, to whatever caught my eye. Usually what caught my eye referred back to me somehow, reminded me of my own life."

As that and everything else in this weird little book clearly indicates, Mahoney was stunningly self-involved, even for a teenager. She resented others for having a good time, for eating and drinking and laughing at Hellman's parties while she herself had to serve dinner—although she was hired and paid to do so. She admits that while Hellman expressed concern and admiration for Mahoney's embattled mother, she herself had never stopped to think about how her mother managed her difficult life. She is slyly bitchy in describing Hellman's friends Rose Styron and Annabel Davis-Goff (then Mrs. Mike Nichols), although their only possible offense was to be attractive, accomplished, and socially secure—to be everything, in short, that Mahoney envied.

There is nothing unusual in a seventeen-year-old being self-involved. The odd thing here is that the adult Mahoney, now about thirty-seven, looks back on her experience without seeming to have gained any perspective on it. She is *still* angry at Hellman for not making her a friend and confidante. She is *still* resentful that she had to perform menial tasks like cooking and mopping the floor. She *still* can't forgive all these famous older people for not being interested in her dull young self. She is still, it seems, unconsciously substituting anger with Hellman, the rude tyrant, for a less acceptable anger with her vulnerable mother.

Mahoney undeniably has talent, and possesses a real gift for descriptive writing. But she shows no pity, insight, humor, compassion, nothing that would give her story richness or dimension. She still seems unaware of what is painfully clear to the reader: that Hellman, while undoubtedly a pain in the neck, was old, feeble, and half-blind; that she was more or less alone in the world, without children or grandchildren; and that most of her friends were fed up with her and her bullying. If she was the employer from hell, then Mahoney, incompetent, resentful, and narcis-

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sistic, was the servant from hell, and more than a match for her. The primary lesson this book teaches us is a timeless one: what you pay for is what you get. Hellman should have paid real money and hired a real maid.

Both Hellman and Naipaul belong to that category of writer who consciously creates a personal myth. Hellman's was that of the tough, hard-drinking, hard-loving, morally uncompromising, independent "new woman." Naipaul has fostered an image of the prototypical post-colonial man without a country, the permanent alien. "I am an exile," he would intone lugubriously—and perhaps pretentiously—in Theroux's presence.

The images are superhuman, the real writers only too human. The younger writers, driven, I suspect, by professional jealousy, are eager to debunk the myths by exposing the mythmakers as being every bit as selfish, petty, and craven as the rest of us.

Ultimately it is a futile exercise. One of Naipaul's passionate beliefs was that, so far as literary merit is concerned, truth is the daughter of time: "That was his greatest strength, his unwavering belief that writing was fair—that a good book cannot fail, that it will ultimately be recognized as good; that a bad book will eventually be seen as junk, no matter what happens in the short run. Only the long run mattered. There was justice in writing." He is probably right: in which case the pinpricks of a Theroux or a Mahoney, however painful, will not make any difference in the end.

I suspect that Lillian Hellman was overrated during her lifetime, and that, the long run having begun, Mahoney's book is a manifestation of the refocusing process. In the next century, Hellman will not be considered a major author; but she will still be a significant figure in her period and will continue to have her fair share of readers. The jury is still out on Naipaul; I, for one, think him almost as fine a writer as he thinks himself, and that is high praise indeed.

Theroux's claim that there was no model or precedent for *Sir Vidia's Shadow* is correct, but the fact that it was so quickly followed by *A Likely Story* would seem to indicate that a new genre is in the making. That a reputable publisher like Doubleday would publish something as trashy as *A Likely Story*—and for all its recondite vocabulary and literary pretensions, trashy it is—means that this sort of very personal exposé is now considered generally acceptable, as it would not have been twenty years ago.

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BRUCE BAWER

Reading at Risk to Ourselves: The Novels of Matthew Stadler

SOME YEARS AGO, WHEN I HAD COME TO FEEL that I was writing too much about authors I didn't like and too little about authors I did, a newspaper book-review editor proposed the following solution: every month or so, after the new bound galleys of eagerly awaited novels by luminaries like John Updike and Toni Morrison had been torn from their battered jiffy bags, slipped into crisp new ones, and sent off to reviewers, she would box up all the remaining fiction galleys—the first novels and second novels and short-story collections with somewhat less familiar, or totally *un*familiar, names on their spines—and mail them to me. I would poke through them, and write about whichever one or two or three of them I found worthy. I agreed readily.

It was amazing how many books those leftovers added up to. Every month I received at least one large cardboard box crammed with printed matter, all of which took untold hours to wade through. The experience was at once exciting and depressing: every new batch of books held out hope of a wonderful discovery, and indeed over the course of a couple of years I found, and enthusiastically reviewed, several titles that I would otherwise probably never have read. Yet working my way through those boxes was nonetheless all too drearily reminiscent of the ordeal of paper-grading. One reason for this was that much of the fiction in those boxes was plainly the work of sometime creative-writing students who, having been taught formulas for communicating experience and creating effects, had been satisfied not to venture far beyond them. Some of the worst books that I read during those couple of years became bestsellers; some of the best sank nearly without a trace.

Watching good books die while bad ones thrived was grim but instructive. It underscored for me the fact that literary artistry, far from guaranteeing that a given novel will be published and reviewed and will find an audience, can be a liability in today's literary marketplace, and that the most endangered species among novelists today, indeed, is the writer who, not content simply to tell an absorbing story or to practice social criticism, is compelled to explore with passionate intensity the fundamental question of what life is really all about—and who, being possessed of a vision that propels him or her outside the American realistic tradition, finds him- or herself obliged to manipulate the genre

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in ways that some readers may find confusing, challenging, even disturbing.

Meet Matthew Stadler. Born in 1959, he has just published his fourth novel, *Allan Stein*;[1] his first, *Landscape: Memory* (1990), was one of the books that I plucked out of those cardboard boxes and ended up reviewing enthusiastically (as did several other critics). Stadler's second and third novels also received some respectful critical attention, and the first three books have all gone into paperback—so one can hardly describe any of them as having sunk without a trace; yet in a time when splashy newspaper and magazine profiles of the likes of Martin Amis and Jay McInerney proliferate, Stadler, by comparison, would seem to fall under the category of well-kept secret. This is lamentable, for he is, in my view, among the most accomplished American novelists of his generation. *Allan Stein*'s narrator says of a Lorca poem that it "might appear to be unreal, but its dreamlike consistency can supplant waking reality by the force of a new coherence and logic, so that one becomes lost in it, like in fantasy or sleep, and the logical yardsticks of waking life that make its measure false are completely lost from view." The same holds for Stadler's fiction. To read his four novels in sequence is to enjoy the spectacle of a spectacularly gifted young writer growing into his art, developing his gift for "dreamlike consistency," exploring ways of making the pieces of his vision cohere. It is also to see certain story elements repeated—with changes rung on them, to be sure—in a way that one doesn't often find in the work of a literary novelist of Stadler's caliber. Before considering *Allan Stein*, then, let us examine its predecessors.

Like many first novels—in fact, like many of the other first novels that I plucked out of those cardboard boxes—*Landscape: Memory* is a coming-of-age story, but it is a far cry from the usual thinly disguised autobiographical account. As rich in intelligence as in sensitivity, it takes the form of a journal by Maxwell Kosegarten, a teenager living in San Francisco during the First World War. How to describe it? "This is a book about memory," Max writes, explaining that his mother has given him for his sixteenth birthday a blank book in which to record his memories. "The mind is a template, pumpkin," she tells him, "a template made of gold—brilliant and malleable. The written word is fixed."

Thus begins a novel—and an *oeuvre*—concerned, in large part, with questions about experience and memory, change and fixity, and the perhaps perverse and ultimately futile compulsion to get it all down on paper. Or, for that matter, canvas. For Max, as it happens, is engaged not only in writing a journal but in painting a picture, the various stages of which appear throughout the book. The picture, which shows him and his friend Duncan looking out over the bay at Bolinas toward a bright

[1] ALLAN STEIN, by *Matthew Stadler*. Grove Press. $23.00. Stadler's earlier books are available in paperback, *Landscape: Memory* from Plume, the other two from HarperPerennial.

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sun, is an attempt to represent Max's happiest memory. But can memory be captured? Should it? Max continually ponders the ability of words to conjure images ("'Cat' is said, and what do I see? A cat, somewhere in my head"), yet he feels that "some things words can't hold. They're too big or they never hold still." Example: Duncan, who inspires thoughts and feelings that defy full expression. Max is, in any case, uncomfortable with his compulsion "to freeze things forever, like with photographs." For him, a memory that's "fixed and frozen, like a photo is, it makes me feel stuck or stifled, like I'm in prison and the walls are straight and clean. . . . Fear starts in me when the world is clear and fixed"; he'd prefer "a watery thought . . . An immense sloshing watery world."

If the mind's effort to respond to the world in words and pictures is for Max an unresolvably ambiguous undertaking that is doomed to failure, the body, by contrast, speaks a clear language: "I give him my body," Max says of Duncan, "and only then do I feel a sense of clarity. It is our way of speaking, the only language that can carry whatever it is we're trying to say." This is an abiding theme in Stadler's work: the inadequacy of words alongside the eloquence of the body. Like James Purdy, the influence of whose unsettling, closure-resistant fictions is often in evidence in his novels, Stadler is haunted by the failure of language to capture experience, to convey meaning, and to comment usefully on the human condition, even as he cannot resist the compulsion to continue writing.

If words and painting fail Max, so does family. An only child, he is close to his parents, who have sought to introduce him to civilization's glories. Yet this tightly knit unit dissolves suddenly when Max's mother announces, with callous matter-of-factness, that she is leaving her husband for Duncan's father. For all her supposed desire to provide her son with the best possible education, she appears to be foolishly unaware of the ways in which she is actually shaping him. Her behavior raises questions present in all his books: What does it mean to educate a budding mind, body, soul? Where do self-discovery and self-fulfillment end, and where does brutal, destructive selfishness begin?

Stadler is not some polemicist who pretends that the answers to these questions are easy or that he is in possession of them. Rather, he is an artist who accepts the world's tensions and contradictions—who is, indeed, preoccupied with modern civilization's moral ambiguities. Though Max's parents are steeped in art, music, and other civilized pleasures, this doesn't save their family—and, ultimately, their son—from dissolution any more than civilization saves Europe from the insanity of World War I, which forms this novel's distant backdrop. To Max's friend Flora, "civilization" is a dirty word: "it is the glory of children," she maintains, "that they remain ignorant of the damning restrictions 'civilized' adults place on human behavior. . . . They swim unclothed and hold and hug one another on impulse. Theirs is a world rich in spiritual communion, unfettered by petty civilities." Like the essays and stories of Guy Davenport—whose influence is apparent here

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and elsewhere in *Landscape: Memory*—Stadler's novels would seem to reflect a powerful love/hate relationship with civilization, in particular with twentieth-century civilization, whose flowering in art and music and literature he plainly cherishes as much as he deplores its wars, tyrannies, and holocausts (and, one must add, the mechanical, amoral bureaucracies that make these horrors possible even as they seek to stifle day by day the possibility of artistic expression and spiritual communion).

Although *Landscape: Memory* does not lie entirely outside the realistic tradition, one continually senses the author's impatience with conventional realism. No surprise, then, that the two novels that followed it take place in dark dreamscapes that recall Kafka and Canetti—and, yes, Purdy and Davenport—more than they do, say, Ann Beattie (to name one writer whose influence was rampant in those cardboard boxes full of books). Stadler's second novel, *The Dissolution of Nicholas Dee* (1993), centers on the eponymous narrator, who is leading a solitary, uneventful existence as a history professor when he begins receiving from an unknown correspondent chapters of a book about a teenager named Oscar Vega. The chapters turn out to have been written by his department chairman's wife, a dwarf named Amelia Weathered, who reveals that she was the mistress of Nicholas' late father, John—a noted historian in the shadow of whose achievements Nicholas has lived his life—and that she was the actual author of his father's famous works. Indeed, she tells him, the elder Dee (namesake of a famed Elizabethan magus and astrologer) was illiterate. Amelia says that she wants Nicholas, who has already outlined a history of insurance, to help her finish writing a book—presumably the book about Oscar Vega, though she never explains why she must write it or why she needs his help.

It is scarcely an accident that Nicholas, who has sought to lead a careful, risk-free life, has planned to write about insurance—a business practice invented by the Dutch, who, living largely on land reclaimed from the sea, have historically led a precarious existence, and who also, in Nicholas' view, "have a peculiar talent for profiting from the insecurity of others." He sees in the Dutch invention of insurance nothing less than "the origin of the modern condition." This is not to say that the Netherlands are demonized here; on the contrary, Stadler repeatedly associates that watery country (which he has worked, in various ways, into all of his books) with physical openness as well as with the kind of "watery thought" that for Max Kosegarten characterizes intellectual and creative endeavor at its most appealing. Contrasted sharply with the Netherlands is Nicholas' city, which, though its setting and topography make clear that it is based on Stadler's hometown, Seattle, is depicted as a place of dark beauty and mystery that is every bit as venerable, stately, and resonant with history—and state terror—as any Central European capital. When the police, in the person of one Inspector Clausewitz (the reference to the author of *On War* is a typical Stadler joke), pressure him to buy sex and drugs in order to aid their undercover efforts to end the traffic in sex and drugs—a scheme whose

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logic remains as unclear as Amelia's plans for her book—Nicholas flees the country with Amelia, Oscar, and Francis, Amelia's twelve-year-old son by John Dee, and heads for the Netherlands to research and write his book.

The shift from Nicholas' unreal city to the very real Netherlands (of which Stadler even provides a map) is accompanied by another shift: Nicholas, who until now has inhabited a cerebral, disembodied world in which even people are reduced to academic concepts, finds himself, as he puts it, "learning from the body." Or, more specifically, from his and Oscar's bodies. Like Max, he reaches a point at which he experiences feelings too big to express in any language other than the body's: "My mind was full with both the moment and a desire to know what was in his mind as he moved over me. What information came through his hands?. . . . There was too much information, scattered over us; I could not read it all. Every word was diminished or exploded. . . . I felt a collapsing inside, as of borders or gaps, and lost every thought or word to his body and to mine. I disappeared in the moment of our transgression. Words could not have me, or hold me." Appropriately enough, while Nicholas learns from Oscar the language of the body, Oscar (who, like John Dee, is illiterate) learns from Nicholas to read and write. Thus does Stadler introduce the topic of sexual relations between an adult and a minor—a theme that has figured more and more prominently in his work, and that has caused some reviewers to denounce him in terms that suggest an inability to distinguish between a writer and his characters and a refusal to accept such material as legitimate subject matter for a novel.

If in *Landscape* Stadler shows the stages of Max's painting, in *Nicholas Dee* he gives us passages from Nicholas' book that describe the construction of a seventeenth-century Dutch opera house, as well as excerpts form Henry Purcell's operatic setting of *The Tempest.* Among other things, its alien, magical setting and its attention to the romance of parent and child make the relevance of *The Tempest* here obvious. Also, as Nicholas comes to perceive, "The body (and its humors) . . . were the source of *The Tempest.*" Above all there is the figure of Prospero, who serves in *Nicholas Dee* as a potent symbol for the perilous enterprise of art. The builder of that Dutch opera house is imagined here as wondering: "Could there ever be an art, again, conjured from the wisdom, and faith, of a magus? An art that was wise about power and magic? . . . Conjurations had become entertainments. Risk and loss were made anathema, and could now be contained. Real power—cold, thorough, systematic power—had finally outstripped these enchantments. Prospero was not killed, but circumstance had forever changed him." Thus begins modernity. One chapter opens with an epigraph ascribed to Nicholas' father: "Because we are incapable of watching or reading fully, generously, and at risk to ourselves, there can be no more Prosperos and no art, only entertainments."

Stadler's third book was *The Sex Offender* (1994), in which the

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elements of pastiche in his two earlier, longer books give way to a tauter narrative with an even more relentless focus on the narratorial consciousness. The book opens with the narrator—like Nicholas Dee, a young teacher in a dark, dreamlike city based on Seattle—being interrogated by "Doctor-General Nicholas Nicholas" (whose double name recalls not only Nicholas Dee but also Humbert Humbert). The teacher has admitted having sex with a twelve-year-old boy and has accordingly been dismissed; yet he seems unable to grasp the view of his actions taken by the nation's Criminal and Health Ministry, which has put him to work as a writer. The difference in perspective between the teacher, who speaks of "love" and an "affair," and Nicholas Nicholas, who speaks of "crime" and "molestation," is rendered in a creepily comical manner that is, one might say, Stadler's *spécialité de la maison.*

Here, as in *Nicholas Dee*, the teacher—who is also mysteriously hired to do makeup and surgical reconstruction at "The Salon," a bizarre clinic that provides "the very best in face-lifts and prosthetics . . . to the [government] ministers and a handful of other dignitaries"—receives puzzling written communications that turn out to be manifestations of an intrigue into which he is being drawn. The scheme involves the narrator's job at "The Salon" and also involves both his country's most celebrated drag queen, Lucrezia, who is now in exile, and its autocratic former Prime Minister, who, meeting the narrator, characterizes his tyranny as an act of love for his people: "I've crushed whole generations, so utter and complete was my love for them." Far from being appalled by this statement, the narrator—in one of a blizzard of curve balls that Stadler throws us in a book that nimbly plays with, and gives an expert workout to, the reader's assumptions about love and power, conformity and criminality, belonging and marginality—expresses understanding and admiration.

The Sex Offender is a small gem of a book, at once funny and unsettling, about the enigmatic connections among lying, role-playing, the maintenance of a civilized society, and the enforcement of tyranny. As ever, Stadler remains enthralled by paradox. Pondering Lucrezia, in whose performances he says he finds "my communion, my ecstasy," the narrator observes that when one is in drag, "The costume hides you and it exposes you to the world. It imprisons you and it sets you free." He speaks, further, of his need for the "nearness and warmth of a friend"—a need that Max might have expressed in *Landscape: Memory*; yet if Max's affection for Duncan seemed a thing of beauty and innocence in a world gone mad, the declaration by the narrator of *The Sex Offender*—who is addressed by others as "Mr. Uh, Uh" or "Mr. Sludge," neither of which, we are told, is his real name—carries a heavy weight of moral complexity. Where, indeed, is the line between communion and exploitation, between love and tyranny?

To turn from *The Sex Offender* to *Allan Stein* is to be startled by Stadler's shift to a more apparently realistic mode. Again, the novel centers on a former teacher who lives in a city based on Seattle and who has recently

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been dismissed from his job on charges of seducing a student—in this case, a tenth-grader named Dogan. The charges were false, he explains, but after the accusation had put the idea in his head, he went ahead and seduced the boy. "The parents never found out (no one did). As it turned out, sex was exactly what the boy wanted, and he became very much the happy, satisfied child they hoped he would be, where before, during the months that I was blind to him, he had been miserable and distracted (precisely the condition, noticed by his parents, that led to their accusation)." The irony here is typical of Stadler.

If the protagonists of *Nicholas Dee* and *The Sex Offender* are mystified by events that turn out to be part of other people's schemes and proceed to learn startling secrets, in *Allan Stein* it is the protagonist who plots and keeps a secret: traveling to Paris to look into the life of Gertrude Stein's nephew Allan—a long-dead man who may, in his childhood, have posed for Picasso's 1906 painting *Boy Leading a Horse*—the protagonist of *Allan Stein* represents himself to everyone as being his friend Herbert, a museum curator, and as researching a book on Allan Stein. Staying at the house of Serge and Miriam, a sophisticated, unconventional married couple not unlike Max Kosegarten's parents, the protagonist—who finds his mask, like that of a drag queen, both imprisoning and liberating—takes a shine to the couple's moody, intelligent teenage son, Stéphane, whom he eventually seduces and audaciously carries away to Provence, only to lose him when the boy discovers his imposture. It is at this point that the reader learns something previously unmentioned: that the protagonist's real name is Matthew, as in Matthew Stadler.

Stadler is, of course, hardly the first writer to give his own name to a novel's protagonist. Proust did it, of course, and the Dutch author Gerard Reve also does it in *De Vierde Man* (*The Fourth Man*)—another book about a gay writer who makes a journey and targets a younger man for seduction. But for Stadler to give his name to the narrator of *Allan Stein* is an act of authorial bravado of rare vintage indeed. The first novel that one thinks of in connection with *Allan Stein* is *Lolita*, the parallels with which begin as early as page four, when Stadler's narrator, like Humbert on page one of Nabokov's novel, lists his pet names for his beloved ("I have called him, at one time or another, noodle boy, *le beau scout*, Blaise, Tony, your nipples are as delicate as cherry blossoms, Miss Pants, my pal, *bougie*, Monsieur Steve," etc.). Yet Nabokov, at least, labored to put some distance between himself and his narrator. Stadler, by contrast, not only gives his protagonist his own first name but seems intent on underscoring their similarities. For that reason, *Allan Stein* may cause even more reader discomfort than *Lolita*.

But then, *Allan Stein* is plainly *intended* to cause discomfort. And readers nowadays are not accustomed to discomfort. They resent it. The idea is, for many of them, entirely unfamiliar. Novels are supposed to divert, not disturb. We may think that things have changed considerably since *Lolita's* original publication, but let us recall that recently the new film adaptation of it, though well-received in Europe, failed to secure a

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U.S. distributor. In America today, anyone who wishes to represent honestly and in all their intricacy the emotions and power shifts involved in intimate liaisons between adult and adolescent is asking for trouble. Nabokov, in *Lolita*, did justice to the complexity of such situations; Stadler, in *Allan Stein*, does as well.

Indeed, he has done more. At a time when the Monica Lewinsky affair has reminded us daily of the huge gulf in many lives between public image and private peccadilloes, Stadler dares to give his own first name to a character who confesses that when he was fourteen, he used to "get out of bed at night, very late, and sneak through the apartment" to his mother's bedroom doorway, where he stood naked and masturbating, all the while "banging the carpet softly with my foot, wondering what would be enough to wake her. . . . I'd keep pulling and pounding, a little harder with each beat until the instant when the nightstand light came on and bathed me for a single pulse, and I ran, naked and almost coming, to my bed to hide. I flourished in the moment of her regard." To be sure, in these times when the shades of Gordon Lish and Harold Brodkey, among others, still hover over the literary landscape, this kind of sensational confession is scarcely unfamiliar to readers of contemporary fiction. What sets Stadler apart from the confessional pack is that he goes on as follows:

> And I think it is the same for Allan, as it is for me, or for Stéphane. It is the fate equally of the boy, the character, and the dead to blossom in the instant of our apprehension, in the moment of being seen, and in the next instant to disappear. Pinned to this flickering edge where there is possibility neither of merging nor of giving up, we are all unreachable. Allan, dead, begs to be watched. He stands just out of reach, frozen at the entrance to the bedroom, unwilling to run until we wake and see him. The house is not his. Art or death trapped him here in a foreign architecture that has fashioned him in one position: poised. He can neither disappear nor ever step forward to join us.

Stadler does not make his protagonist here, as he does in both *Nicholas Dee* and *The Sex Offender*, an almost entirely unsocialized citizen of an oppressive, manifestly anti-sex state. Both Nicholas Dee and "Mr. Sludge" can easily be understood—and sympathized with—as confused, deprived souls who have been driven to the point of desperation; Matthew, by contrast, comes off as a seemingly casual exploiter, a privileged, socially successful young man who toys with other people's lives for his own amusement. Yes, the world's attitudes toward love and sex are dishonest, but Matthew is (as he admits from the outset) duplicitous. And the people he's deceiving—Serge and Miriam—are not prim, sex-negative types who seek to deprive their son of erotic pleasure, but are in fact quite gung-ho about the joys of the flesh and, it turns out, astonishingly *un*-hysterical about Matthew's seduction of Stéphane; what they object to, Miriam says, is not the seduction but the lie.

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Matthew offers no explicit defense of his actions, though he does make a point of differentiating himself from the "romantics" who "inflict" their "idealizations" on children; in his view, plainly, he is a realist for whom, as he explains, the magic of youth lies not in its supposed purity and innocence (a fantasy cherished, as Stadler himself has argued in a 1997 article for the Seattle *Stranger*, both by pietistic defenders of "the family" and by NAMBLA "boy-lovers") but in its limitless potential. If adulthood, in other words, is a time of recognizing one's—and life's—limitations and learning to live with them, adolescence is a time of discovering one's gifts and tastes and possibilities along with the joys of both the mind and the body. "Boys have this power, you see," Matthew tells an acquaintance in Paris. "I'm fascinated that they could be Gods, which no man can be but a boy could."

Yet if Matthew is a realist, he is a realist with a questionable connection to reality—one who, among other things, bookends his narrative with two contradictory versions of the same episode. (One is reminded at times of the exquisite unreliability of Ford Madox Ford's masterpiece *The Good Soldier*.) What's more, Matthew often appears to be idealizing Stéphane, referring to the boy (who says "I am the devil") as a "solemn angel." Though he claims that he saw in Stéphane "everything I could ever love," he depersonalizes him, saying of Stéphane's body that "what I saw verged on abstraction." Indeed, Matthew recognizes that his fascination with Stéphane has less to do with the boy as such than with the memories Stéphane recalls to mind. Describing a walk with Stéphane through the streets of Paris, Matthew says that "Language was the least of our barriers. Stéphane hovered behind a scrim, trapped inside a body whose proportions and angularity perfectly expressed something to me. . . . 'becoming,' I'd like to say, but it might have been nostalgia. His posture . . . enthralled me by pointing elsewhere—away from him."

Toward what? Mainly toward Matthew's own boyhood. For stirred into the story of Matthew's seduction of Stéphane are not only anecdotes (based on archival material) about Allan Stein's "perfect summer" in France when he was seventeen but also Matthew's memories of his first vacation in Paris with his mother at age sixteen, during which he had a relationship with an older man. Yet it is Matthew's mother, and not his long-ago older lover, who dominates his memories of that trip. Thanks to his youthful preoccupation with his mother, Matthew testifies that "I've been in love with women more often than men, I think because they're linked to boys in a way that men are not. . . . A woman with a son is magical." Thus not only Stéphane but Miriam captivates Matthew, who—realizing all the while that he is alternating between being "normal" and "creepy"—climbs a tree in the family's yard to watch her massaging oil into her son's back.

It is impossible to read *Allan Stein* as romanticizing or making a hero of its protagonist. Even as Stadler gives the character his name, he makes him less morally sympathetic than any of his previous novels' narrators.

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Yet Matthew is, at the same time, more engaging on the level of sheer feeling than either Nicholas Dee or "Mr. Sludge," whose hold on the reader tends to be more intellectual than emotional. Indeed, Matthew is a supremely human creation: one does not have to be male or gay or attracted to adolescents and/or their mothers in order to identify strongly with Matthew's easy descent into deception and his thrill over his conquest of Stéphane. When we look at Matthew, we look into a mirror; he is appalling, and so, in our sundry ways, driven by whatever passions may possess us, are we.

Though novel-length, *Allan Stein* has the elegant contours and tautness of a classic novella. To come to the end of it after having read Stadler's earlier books is to be in awe both of his consistent artistry and of his steady growth in authority and focus. To be a truly serious literary artist is to accept and to plumb one's deepest and most distinctive obsessions, and Stadler, with each book, has engaged his obsessions more and more boldly and explicitly. And there's the rub—for the more he has done this, the more he has been in danger of discomforting, to the point of alienation, both the reading public and the critical establishment. The question is this: Can American literary culture absorb a novel that touches on themes that have been permitted to safely dead, alien, and/or ancient writers like Cavafy and Catullus? My own view is that, in the case of a writer as extraordinary as Stadler, we should all be grateful that he has found his window on the human condition and has been brave and gifted enough to tell us what he sees through it.

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SUSAN BALÉE

Victorian Voyages and Other Mind Trips

A FASCINATION WITH ALL THINGS VICTORIAN continues in fiction as well as in film. Clearly, some aspect of nineteenth-century culture is intersecting with our twentieth-century *Weltanschauung* and we are drawn back to this particular past. I think one of the main points of connection concerns an obsessive quest for knowledge, no matter how dangerous. The intellectual imperialism that dominated Europe and America through much of the nineteenth century has risen with new intensity in the age of the Internet. Now, as then, it's a tangled web we weave.

Certainly, the thirst for knowledge and the control of that knowledge is the theme that animates my favorite novel of the last year, Andrea Barrett's *The Voyage of the Narwhal.*[1] This novel tracks a fictional voyage to the Arctic to discover an open polar sea. It's fiction, but it's studded with facts. Barrett has her nineteenth-century idioms down and her characters are believably Victorian. Nevertheless, they are also helping her to develop a subtext about how history is written and about the interpretive dilemma posed every writer—of history or anything else. The main narrator of *Voyage*, a fictional naturalist from Philadelphia named Erasmus Darwin Wells, pinpoints—in his journal—the impossibility of making words represent experiences.

> *That old problem of trying to show things both sequentially, and simultaneously. If I drew that scene I'd show everything happening all at once, everyone present and every place visible, from the bottom of the river to the clouds. But when I describe it in words one thing follows another and everything's shaped by my single pair of eyes, my single voice.*

Barrett does her best to deal with this shortcoming of language by having the novel told from a variety of viewpoints, using journals as well as interior monologues, male as well as female voices, and American, European, and Esquimaux perspectives. Her cleverness in orchestrating the scenes makes this novel a marvel—she is equally good at pacing her plot, developing her characters, and weaving through the whole a very interesting meditation on the complicated interplay of history, fiction, truth, and memory.

[1] THE VOYAGE OF THE NARWHAL, by *Andrea Barrett.* W.W. Norton & Company. $24.95.

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Historically, we learn a great deal about John Franklin's ill-fated voyage to the Arctic in 1845. Franklin simply vanished, and the party led by Dr. Kane that tried to find him in 1851 found only the tombs of three of Franklin's seamen and disturbing evidence that the men had resorted to cannibalism before they'd starved to death. We also learn a fair amount about Arctic geography, the history of Greenland and the Esquimaux (the French form of the Algonquin name for these natives, meaning "raw meat eaters"), the state of women, museums, and Transcendentalism in 1850s America. It's a most pleasant way to pick up a little history, as long as one can discern between the history and the fiction.

For the fiction, you see, prospers up apace with the history, and sometimes it's hard to tell the one from the other. Erasmus D. Wells, for example, is not a real person, though John Franklin was. Nor are Erasmus' experiences real, though they sound as if they might have been. In fact, the only narrator whose thoughts do not sound appropriately Victorian are those of Erasmus' love interest, Alexandra Copeland. She and her sisters sound far more like post-Friedan feminists than mid-nineteenth-century spinsters.

Commenting on a contemporary novel in which the heroine is given a mahogany desk, Alexandra's abolitionist sister Emily says, "Men make fun of [this book], I know you all do. You like tales of adventure. . . . But the novel is about tyranny, really; the tyranny of family and circumstances, and how one survives when running away isn't an option. Which it never is for women like us." This is the comment of a twentieth-century feminist contemplating the lives of Victorian women; it's not a statement any Victorian woman would have expressed with such conviction, such measured judgment. Certainly the intelligent and introspective Victorian woman sometimes felt trapped in her domestic sphere, but hers would have been an inchoate dissatisfaction, nothing as clear as the twentieth-century hindsight of the above statement.

On the contrary, the public statements of the early suffragettes reveal that they didn't think in terms of surviving or running away—they thought about achieving the vote, gaining access to quality education, ultimately finding professional—as opposed to domestic—work. And almost all of them, if polled, would have preferred marriage to a career.

But this momentary lapse in historical veracity is a mere quibble about an otherwise fine novel. No one can escape her historical moment entirely, but Andrea Barrett has done it better than any other novelist whose work I've read for this fiction chronicle. Better than Tom Petsinis in his fictional autobiography of a very real nineteenth-century mathematician, Evariste Galois. Petsinis' novel, *The French Mathematician*,[2] is a fine study of a troubled young man, but it doesn't sound like a troubled young man in 1820s France. The mathematical discoveries *are* neat

[2] THE FRENCH MATHEMATICIAN, by *Tom Petsinis*. Walker and Company. $24.00.

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(Galois came up with Group Theory before he was twenty and Petsinis manages to explain this prodigious feat of mathematical thinking so that even numerically-challenged readers can twig it. No surprise that he teaches math at Australia's Victoria University of Technology), but the interior monologue doesn't always fit the rest of the equation.

For example, to clue in the reader to Galois's life before he lands in a Parisian prep school, the autobiographical narrator must muse about events he already understands: "Why did Father insist I study in Paris? I was happy at home. . . . Mother could have seen to my education. After all, she taught me to read and write, introduced me to Greek and Latin, and later made a point of reading from the Bible. Yes, she was demanding, harsh at times, especially when it came to the Bible, but there was always Father's company to make up for this." This, alas, is idiot dialogue—it conveys necessary information to the reader but puts the narrator in the awkward position of telling himself what he already knows.

Nevertheless, *The French Mathematician* is an ambitious novel, and Petsinis' fictional technique gains sophistication as he gets deeper into the tragic story of Galois, who was killed in a duel at age twenty-one. Like *The Voyage of the Narwhal*, this book also grapples with nineteenth-century intellectual history and its prudish but pushy, naïve but narcissistic thinkers.

The third book that I would place in the triumvirate of Best Novels of 1997–98 helped its author win the Nobel Prize for Literature. I am referring to *Blindness*,[3] by the Portuguese writer José Saramago. Admittedly, he has a rather annoying approach to dealing with the simultaneity of events conveyed through the linearity of language, but readers will get the hang of it after a few pages. Saramago's narrative style looks at first like an exercise in bad grammar—comma splices occur in what seems like every other sentence. Here is a sample from one of the first pages:

> But blindness isn't like that, said the other fellow, they say that blindness is black, Well I see everything white, That little woman was probably right, it could be a matter of nerves, nerves are the very devil, No need to talk to me about it, it's a disaster, yes a disaster, Tell me where you live please, and at the same time the engine started up.

Composition teacher that I am, I read with a pen in hand for the first few pages, circling the splices and searching for the name of the (I assumed) inept translator. Then Saramago's intention dawned on me: each clause separated by a comma represented a different perspective on the event at hand. Some clauses represented particular voices, some

[3] BLINDNESS, by *José Saramago*. Trans. by *Giovanni Pontiero*. Harcourt Brace & Company. $22.00.

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objective observations, others were comments from an omniscient authorial presence. I dropped my pen and let myself sink into the style, and then the style worked. Saramago's unfettered clauses enabled each scene's disparate elements and characters to come closer to synchrony.

In terms of its subject, the novel is a morality tale, another entrant in the millennial fiction contest (other contenders this year include *Toward the End of Time* by John Updike and *Blue Light* by Walter Mosley[4]). Saramago's story is just what its title tells us: a man goes suddenly, inexplicably blind and soon after almost everyone he has come in contact with also goes blind, and then their contacts, and on and on. What seems to be an epidemic of blindness with no physical cause terrifies the government: the blind and their associates are soon incarcerated in an abandoned mental hospital, under armed guard, and this setting quickly becomes a concentration camp for the blind.

What we learn from millennial, apocalyptic fiction is that humans never outgrow their capacity for inhumanity. Place average, seemingly kind folk in a desperate situation, and their most brutal instincts will rise to the fore. The mob rules the individual and fear rules the mob.

Of course, there are isolated acts of selflessness among the mob, and Saramago captures these as well as the savagery, the general cruelty of people struggling to survive. *Blindness* has been compared favorably to similar works by Orwell, Kafka, and Camus. Its ironies run equally deep; its ruminations on human nature are equally disheartening. In terms of plot and incident, it limns Primo Levi's nonfiction portrayal of Auschwitz. In other words, there's nothing new in this book, but what's here is very well done. Saramago has taken on the archetypal plot of "civilized" humans forced into an uncivilized situation, and I expect his version of the allegory will last well into the next millennium (whereas Updike's and Mosley's probably will not).

Better than the year's novels were the short story collections. I read several that were absolutely stellar. My favorite among them all was Chris Offutt's *Out of the Woods*.[5] I guess it doesn't hurt that Offutt hails from Eastern Kentucky, same as my father's relatives, and danged if he doesn't look just like he could be my dad's brother in the jacket photo! So I felt an immediate kinship even before I started the stories, but the stories themselves are masterful. Offutt has the drop-dead humor and dead-on dialogue of Flannery O'Connor.

In my favorite story of the collection, "Moscow, Idaho," two ex-cons are moving graves in a cemetery about to be bisected by a highway. Spading out the dirt and pulling out the coffins has naturally turned their thoughts to death, as the following conversation reveals.

[4] John Updike, *Toward the End of Time* (New York, 1998). Walter Mosley, *Blue Light* (Boston, 1998).

[5] OUT OF THE WOODS, by *Chris Offutt*. Simon and Schuster. $21.00.

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"I was just a kid last time, for my grandmaw's funeral. I ever tell you about her?"

"No."

"She died."

"I guessed that."

"Hung herself from a clothes pole in a closet. Knocked her own wheelchair out from under her. The only suicide the nursing home said they ever had, but you can't trust them bastards."

"You got that right."

"They ought to lock that home down. A little blue-haired lady with no legs hanging in a closet like an old dress."

"No legs?"

"She had diabetes," Baker said. "Know what they did so nobody else would do it?"

"Threw them in the hole."

"No, man. They took away the clothes pole in every closet. They can't hang nothing no more. All them old folks wearing wrinkly clothes."

If Offutt's hillbilly wisdom and Southern gothic humor don't win readers over, I'm hard-pressed to guess what will. I read the whole collection in an evening and finished eager to find anything else by him that I could get my hands on.

One of Offutt's distinctive gifts is the ability to write about a very particular place, the hollows of Kentucky—a place where many people never leave their own county and some never leave their own hill. Such folk resemble a species studied in isolation—like Darwin's Galapagos tortoises—and their habitat has prompted them to develop curious strategies for coping with life, love, and family.

His work is additionally valuable because Offutt is charting a world that may not be around for much longer. As Wal-Marts and McDonald's and malls homogenize every town in America, soon even the most rural parts of our country will be paved over by a generic version of the landscape and the culture. Of course, the South will remain among the last holdouts, and that may be why Southern writers have something distinctive to offer in their fiction, their plots and characters; they have experienced something to write about other than their own childhoods and subsequent academic careers. The still unique atmosphere and language of the South provide the freshness and originality found in Chris Offutt's writing and that of his contemporaries, Robert Olen Butler, Alice Walker, Dorothy Allison, and Mary Karr among them.

Three other collections I read offered expected delights, and these were the new books by Lorrie Moore, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, and Alice Munro. Munro's short stories succeed by a slow but steady accretion of telling detail that finally adds up to a profound insight on human character. I have never seen another fiction writer quite like her,

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because she eschews the fast opener, the "compelling hook" at the beginning of her stories, and yet still we love to read them.

Although I much enjoyed the title story of *The Love of a Good Woman*,[6] my favorite in the new collection is "Before the Change," narrated through a series of letters a woman composes to her former lover. Many secrets are revealed in the course of this story, and a recurring theme in it (and all of Munro's stories) is that nothing is ever what it seems, or, at least never *merely* what it seems. The effect may be evident, but the causes of that effect are quite frequently misidentified, as in the following passage:

> R. The days you were here Mrs. B. was off for Christmas with her family. . . . I don't think you saw her at all. But she saw you. She said to me yesterday, "Where's that Mr. So-and-so you were supposed to be engaged to?. . . I was up at my niece's last Christmas and we seen you and him walking up by the standpipe and my niece said, 'I wonder where them two are off to?'" This is exactly how she talks and it already sounds quite normal to me except when I write it down. I guess the implication is that we were going somewhere to carry on, but there was a deep freeze on, if you remember, and we were just walking to get away from the house. No. We were walking outside so we could continue our fight, which could only be bottled up for so long.

Munro's characters invariably learn something important about themselves in the course of her stories, and frequently—as in this story—it's something positive about their own choices in life, their own values and strengths. The insights, then, are only occasionally cynical, and I invariably come away from hours reading Munro with a feeling that I've been bathed in good karma. Not everyone is evil, or rapacious, or stupid. Good deeds still happen, and happen without the doer's seeking recompense or acknowledgment.

Probably I'm too optimistic, but this is why Alice Munro continues to be one of my favorite fiction writers. Others may match her in technical skill, but they can't match her sense of intelligent hopefulness about humanity. I say all this to indicate the contrast of Munro with Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, whose short stories are technically brilliant, but depressingly pessimistic about human nature.

The recurring theme in the stories collected in *East Into Upper East*[7] seems to be that people can't legislate their hearts. Relatively good people can devote themselves to rotten, evil, undeserving, false people, and they do it all the time. Of course, they get terribly hurt in the

[6] THE LOVE OF A GOOD WOMAN, by *Alice Munro*. Alfred A. Knopf. $24.00.
[7] EAST INTO UPPER EAST, by *Ruth Prawer Jhabvala*. Counterpoint. $25.00.

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end—sometimes even cruelly punished—but this is the way life is, at least in Jhabvala's fiction.

The opening story, which the author weaves with all the care and color and superior composition of a fine tapestry, depicts the story of a wealthy Indian merchant and his doting love for his little brother Bablu. The elder brother cannot stop loving this boy, not even after Bablu robs him and stabs his wife. He can't stop loving him even after Bablu kidnaps the young son of a prominent officer in the army, rapes, and then kills the child. Jhabvala wants us to understand something about the tenacious nature of love, but this story is hard to take: the little brother has no redeeming features to speak of; he is a sadistic little sociopath.

Bablu also represents the first in a series of gay characters who are drawn unpleasantly—they are often sly as well as gay. One such character is a murderer, another a con man, a third a cruel gigolo. The most likable of Jhabvala's homosexual main characters is Boy, from the story "A Summer by the Sea." Susie, the narrator of "Summer," is married to Boy, and she has decided to accept the fact that he will never love her as she loves him. She also accepts his numerous conquests of other men.

> . . . Terry himself was one of the people who taught me that it's not good to care too much. I was like him once—for instance, when he and Boy were very much involved with each other—and I used to torment myself by spying, speculating, finding out. But now I don't do that anymore.

Boy has married her for her money, but Susie accepts this too.

> And now Terry was saying, "I don't know how you stand it, Susie." And I said, as I always say to Mother, "Oh, it's okay. I don't mind." But I'm getting tired of people deciding for me what I can stand and what I can't. How do they know? Maybe I like things the way they are. No one ever tells me that it's wrong for me to love Mother for the way she is and not for how she is supposed to be. Then why not Boy—why can't I care for him the way he is?

The rest of Jhabvala's stories follow this theme. A homely girl falls in love with her dying aunt's hired "man," Paul, only to discover he's having an affair with another hanger-on in the house, Annette. Both Annette and Paul fake their love for aunt and niece in the hope of securing some of the aunt's large fortune. That story is aptly titled "Parasites," and some of the others might be called "The Spiritually Unenlightened," because these deal with empty Americans seeking spiritual fulfilment. What they usually get is a sham holy woman from India who lives off them until she gets bounced in favor of another sham shaman.

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I longed for an intelligent, goodhearted, and discerning narrator, as one often finds in Munro's stories, but there were none in evidence here. Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's prose sparkles like a crystal goblet, but by the time I closed the book, I felt more like the sponge that had swabbed out the goblet and been contaminated by whatever it had contained.

Luckily, though Lorrie Moore's stories are also often depressing, they are also squeal-out-loud funny. I think her new collection, *Birds of America*,[8] is the best yet, too. The main reason for this is that the entire body of work is strong. In earlier collections, such as *Like Life*, some stories were magnificent, while others were jarringly mediocre. Moore seems on top of her game now; her tales are almost all winners.

For those who haven't sampled Moore before, she has a smart-alecky brand of humor, most often interpolated through a smart-alecky female narrator who's going through a rough patch in her life. For example, the heroine of "Willing" moves from L.A. (where she's enjoyed only minor success as an actress) to a Day's Inn in Chicago, near the suburb where her aging parents live. The actress begins to vegetate in her hotel room, whose deteriorating condition (she won't let the maids in) echoes her own. "She was starting to have two speeds: Coma and Hysteria. Two meals: breakfast and popcorn."

As Lorrie Moore's characters often do, she meets an unsuitable man and suits up with him anyway. This one is a car mechanic named Walt.

> "What's the last movie you saw?" she asked him.
>
> "The last movie I saw. Let's see." He was thinking, but she could tell he wasn't good at it.

This collection abounds with women, particularly mothers and daughters (the "birds" of America). It also features precocious children, family dogs, disease and death. But all of this is animated with humor, with puns and one-liners and comic situations. Lorrie Moore has become the female comic writer who can stand up to Raymond Carver's gloomy machismo as a favorite model for fiction workshops. The thing is, humorous fiction that still contains serious meaning is the hardest of all to write. Lorrie Moore can write it and Chris Offutt can write it, too. Perhaps that is why of all the fine stories I read these last months, theirs commanded my respect not only as a reader, but as a writer. They make it look easy.

At any rate, though the fate of the West seems to hang on one man's zipper these days, at least the state of fiction is secure. 1998 was a great year for telling stories, and for writing them too.

[8] BIRDS OF AMERICA, by *Lorrie Moore*. Alfred A. Knopf. $23.00.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

MICHAEL LIND, the Washington Editor of *Harper's Magazine* and a Senior Fellow at the New America Foundation, is the author of *The Alamo: An Epic* (Houghton Mifflin, 1997). . . . In 1943, IVAN BUNIN* (1870–1953) was the first Russian writer to receive the Nobel Prize. "Rusya" originally appeared in *Dark Avenues* (1943), the author's last volume of short stories. GRAHAM HETTLINGER,* who is translating the complete collection, works for the American Council of Teachers of Russian in Washington, D.C. . . . BRIAN COX is Emeritus Professor of English at the University of Manchester, England. His *Collected Poems* was published by Carcanet in 1993. . . . JOSEPH EPSTEIN's essay in this issue is adapted from his Daniel Coit Gilman Lecture, which he gave at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine in November 1998. His new book of familiar essays, *Narcissus Leaves the Pool*, has just been published by Houghton Mifflin. . . . D. NURKSE, the Poet Laureate of Brooklyn, is the recipient of a Whiting Writers Award and two NEA fellowships. His next book, *Leaving Xaia*, is forthcoming from Four Way Books. . . . LYNNE McMAHON is a Professor of English at the University of Missouri. Her third collection of poems, *All Quail to the Wallowing*, is due from David R. Godine this spring . . . . LUCILLE LANG DAY's poetry collections are *Self-Portrait with Hand Microscope* (Berkeley Poets' Workshop and Press) and *Fire in the Garden* (Mother's Hen). . . . DEAN ALBARELLI is completing a two-year appointment as Writer-in-Residence at Smith College. He is the author of *Cheaters and Other Stories* (St. Martin's Griffin), a selection of Barnes & Noble's "Discover Great New Writers" series. . . . JEFFREY HARRISON's most recent book is *Signs of Arrival* (Copper Beech, 1996). He is currently writer-in-residence at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts. . . . In 1997, JAYANTA MAHAPATRA published *Shadow Space*, a collection of poems, and *The Green Gardener*, a collection of short stories.

JOHN HALES teaches literature and writing at California State University, Fresno. . . . PATTIANN ROGERS' book-length essay titled *The Dream of the Marsh Wren: Writing as Recriprocal Creation* will be published by Milkweed Editions in May. . . . STEPHEN C. BEHRENDT's latest collection of poetry is *A Step in the Dark* (Mid-List Press, 1996) . . . . NINA BOGIN lives in France. Her first poetry collection was *In the North* (Graywolf Press). . . . F.D. REEVE's forthcoming book of poems is *The Moon and Other Failures*. . . . DAVID DOOLEY has published two volumes of poetry with Story Line Press and is currently living in San Diego. . . . PATRICK WALSH* lives in Princeton, New Jersey. His poetry has appeared in *Press* and *The Recorder* (the Journal of the American-Irish Historical Society). . . . BERT CARDULLO has been named an editor of the first-ever *Norton Anthology of Drama*, and is at work as well on a translation of André Bazin's criticism titled *French Cinema from the Liberation to the New Wave, 1945–1958*. . . . JOHN LOUGHERY's *The Other Side of Silence: Men's Lives and Gay Identities* will be out in paperback in June (Owl Books/Henry Holt). . . . DAVID MASON's collection of essays, *The Poetry of Life*, will appear next fall from Story Line Press. The fourth edition of *Western Wind*, which he edited with John Frederick Nims, will be out this summer from McGraw-Hill. . . . BROOKE ALLEN is a frequent contributor to *The New Criterion*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The New Leader*. . . . BRUCE BAWER's book *Stealing Jesus* is now in paperback from Three Rivers Press. . . . SUSAN BALÉE is the editor of *Northeast Corridor*, whose sixth issue is now available in bookstores across America.

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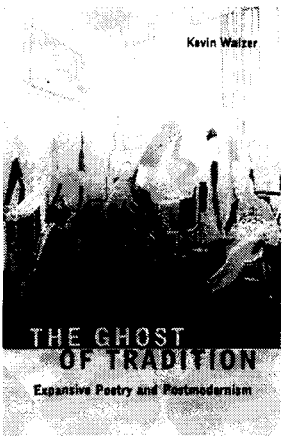

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IN THIS ISSUE:

But, somehow, the saddest of all these sad stories is that of John Keats (1795–1821), who left the earth, astonishingly gifted, feeling himself deeply unfulfilled and sorely disappointed at the age of twenty-five. Should anyone ever lapse into the belief that perfect justice is available here on earth, ten seconds' contemplation of the life of John Keats ought to suffice to put that thought permanently out of one's mind. The very cause behind Keats's death was, in any calculus of justice, all wrong: he was infected with tuberculosis—then known of course as consumption—while in a condition of low resistance after returning from a trip in Scotland to attend to his brother Tom, himself in an advanced consumptive state. He died, in other words, out of an act of purely selfless good. He also died in pellucid awareness that his great promise had not come to fruition. What he couldn't know, of course, was that, in substantial part, it already had, though he may have had slight intimations of this.

—Joseph Epstein, "The Medical Keats," p. 44.

Then he hurriedly helped her dress and wrapped her up in the blanket. Her eyes and her black hair, still tied in a braid, stood out sharply in the dim light. He didn't dare to touch her anymore; he only kissed her hands and sat without talking, seized by an almost unbearable joy. Sometimes they heard a light rustling in the leaves, and it seemed that someone was standing among the black trees and scattered lights of the fireflies on the bank—standing and listening to them.

—Ivan Bunin, "Rusya," p. 19.

Yet as an undergraduate [Ted Hughes] was a rebel. He created a considerable reputation as a man rather than a poet. In those Leavis dominated years, so unsympathetic to the early work of young writers, I never found out he wrote verse. Craggily handsome, he radiated an extraordinary dynamism, a power and integrity which later made his public readings so impressive. He has often been compared to Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*. He was already fascinated by the Ouija board and the occult, and there were Pembroke stories about the frightening intensity with which he engaged in these activities.

—Brian Cox, "Ted Hughes: A Personal Retrospect," p. 29.

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